

A manga cover illustration featuring a young woman with long, dark hair and large, expressive brown eyes. She is wearing a school uniform consisting of a white short-sleeved shirt with a blue sailor-style collar and a blue and white plaid skirt. She is looking over her shoulder towards the viewer with a slight smile. Her right hand is resting on a dark, vertical metal pole. The background is a soft-focus outdoor scene with green foliage and a bright, hazy sky. The overall color palette is dominated by blues, greens, and the white of her shirt.

14

Gakuto
Mikumoto

ILLUSTRATION BY
Manyako

STRIKE THE BLOOD

GOLDEN DAYS

VISIT...

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14 STRIKE THE BLOOD

GOLDEN DAYS

Gakuto Mikumo
Illustration by Manyako



Kojou Akatsuki
The Fourth Primogenitor
The world's mightiest—and
laziest—vampire

Yukina Himeragi
Sword Shaman
The Lion King Agency's
beautiful observer



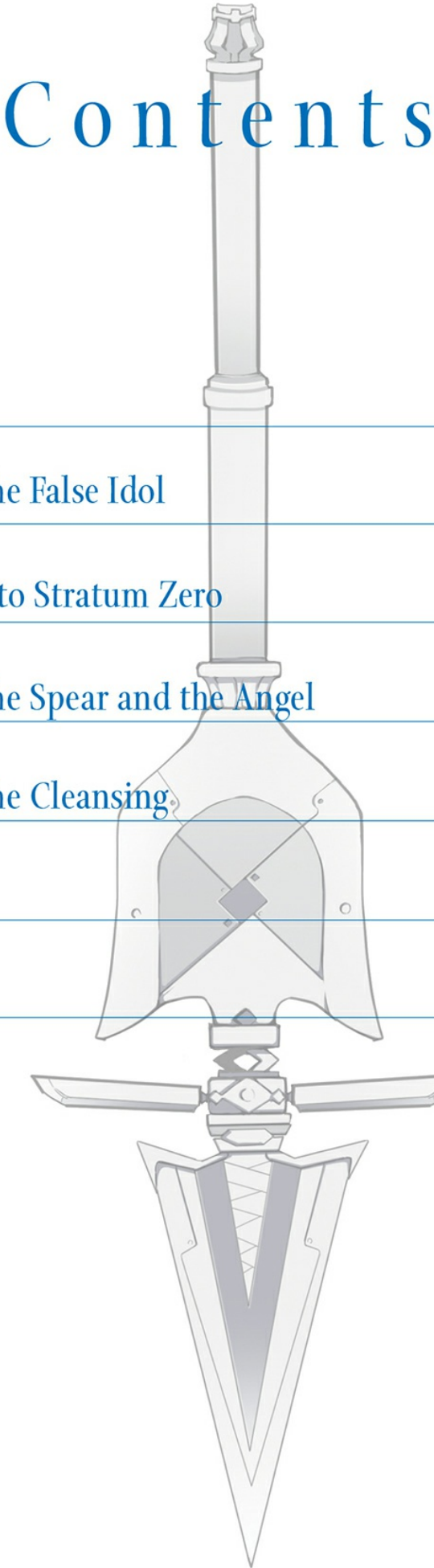
Asagi Aiba
Cyber Empress
Gorgeous, selfish
high school cyber genius

Lydianne Didier
Tanker
The playful prodigy of steel



Meiga Itogami
The Jiangshi
A treacherous undead man
lurking in darkness

Dimitrie Vattler
Duke of Ardeal
Frivolous noble
and Master of Serpents



Contents

Intro

Chapter One The False Idol

Chapter Two Into Stratum Zero

Chapter Three The Spear and the Angel

Chapter Four The Cleansing

Outro

Afterword

STRIKE THE BLOOD

GOLDEN DAYS

14

GAKUTO MIKUMO

ILLUSTRATION BY
MANYAKO

YEN
ON
NEW YORK

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STRIKE THE BLOOD, Volume 14

GAKUTO MIKUMO

Translation by Jeremiah Bourque Cover art by Manyako

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SUTORAIKU ZA BURADD0 Vol.14

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Edited by Dengeki Bunko

First published in Japan in 2015 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.

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First Yen On Edition: January 2020

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Names: Mikumo, Gakuto, author. | Manyako, illustrator. | Bourque, Jeremiah, translator.

Title: Strike the blood / Gakuto Mikumo, Manyako ; translation by Jeremiah Bourque.

Other titles: Sutoraiku za buraddo. English Description: New York, NY : Yen On, 2016— Identifiers: LCCN 2015041522 | ISBN 9780316345477 (v. 1 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316345491 (v. 2 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316345514 (v. 3 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316345538 (v. 4 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316345569 (v. 5 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316345583 (v. 6 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316562652 (v. 7 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316442084 (v. 8 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316442107 (v. 9 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316442121 (v. 10 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316442145 (v. 11 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316442183 (v. 12 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975384838 (v. 13 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975332587 (v. 14 : pbk.) Subjects: CYAC: Vampires—Fiction. | BISAC: FICTION / Science Fiction / Adventure.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.M555 Su 2016 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <http://lcn.loc.gov/2015041522>

ISBNs: 978-1-97533258-7 (paperback) 978-1-9753-3259-4 (ebook)

E3-20191218-JV-NF-ORI

Contents

[Cover](#)

[Insert](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Intro](#)

[Chapter One: The False Idol](#)

[Chapter Two: Into Stratum Zero](#)

[Chapter Three: The Spear and the Angel](#)

[Chapter Four: The Cleansing](#)

[Outro](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Yen Newsletter](#)



INTRO

INTRO

“MRA presents Inside Itogami!!

“You are listening to Channel JOMW—FM Itogami. The time is two thirty PM.

“Starting now is our Inside Itogami corner, where we introduce you to people and events concerning affairs on the island. Today we are broadcasting from Artificial Isle Studio 3 from the highest stratum of Keystone Gate.

“Now then, with the Roses of Tartarus incident still fresh in everyone’s minds—it’s been about two weeks, right, since Tartarus Lapse, the Demon Sanctuary wrecking crew, launched the large-scale demon registration bracelet cyberattack. The destruction from that incident still scars various places inside Itogami City, but even now, urban restoration work is proceeding with the utmost urgency.

“The monorail loop line has been slow to reopen, but it is returning to normal business operation from this day forward. Except for one section of international routes, all airplane flights have resumed service. With one district excepted, the restriction on travel for roads along the bay will also be lifted...something that I’m sure comes as a relief to many.

“Now if there’s one person attracting attention on Itogami Island this very moment—yes, it’s her. I’m talking about the exceedingly beautiful, genius hacker who stopped Tartarus Lapse’s hacking attack, containing the damage to Itogami Island to the most minimal level possible—Asagi Aiba, the Cyber Empress.

“Asagi Aiba is currently sixteen. Although she is a high school student here in Itogami City, known to precious few, she is actually a genius programmer...and a celebrity in the hacking world. Until now, she has developed numerous revolutionary programs under the nickname Cyber Empress.

“Highly valuing her intelligence and exploits, the Gigafloat Management

Corporation had hired Miss Asagi as a part-time employee. On the day of the incident, she was the first to detect Tartarus Lapse's assault and succeeded in creating a program to counter the hack on her own judgment. As a result, her actions saved Itogami Island from the menace of the Demon Sanctuary wrecking crew's terrorist attack.

"That alone is incredible enough, but what really skyrocketed her to stardom was her movie-star looks—in particular, her video interview immediately following the incident became known on the net as the Seven Miraculous Seconds and has over six million views online. She truly is adorable, and a school uniform suits her extremely well.

"Miss Asagi's father is Mr. Sensai Aiba, a serving member of the Itogami City Council. Miss Asagi herself has lived here on Itogami Island from a very young age and has been locally famous as a beautiful girl ever since. She truly is an idol this Demon Sanctuary can be proud of.

"At the request of the Gigafloat Management Corporation, Miss Asagi is currently involved in a large-scale project for Itogami Island's restoration. Additionally, she is giving her all to charitable activities to support the victims of the incident. Next month, she is scheduled to release a charity song to support Itogami Island's reconstruction. She has already shot a television commercial which includes her performance, and we are certainly looking forward to seeing how it comes out.

"Our channel is on standby for messages of support for Asagi Aiba and any information related to her, requests for what you want to see Miss Asagi doing in the future, any Miss Asagi sightings within the city, and any private information on Miss Asagi that only you know—bring it all to this channel's home page, please!

"Now then, let us listen to a song. For the Itogami Island Revival Support Project, from Miss Asagi Aiba, here's the tune 'Save Our Sanctuary,' followed by its companion, 'Unrequited Love Parameter'..."



The blood drawn from her fingertip was lapped up by the tiny, plastic kit.

A single vermillion drop fell, spreading like a cloud through the testing fluid that filled the kit.

She had noticed a change in her physical condition some ten days prior. In actuality, the abnormality in her body had surely begun earlier than that.

She knew the cause. Since the very beginning, she had resigned herself to the inevitability.

“.....”

She bit her lip as she gazed at her reflection in the mirror.

Her body refused food. When she tried to force herself to eat, she felt sick and nauseated. There was no dramatic change in her external appearance. If she had to call attention to something, her eyes looked moist, as if she had a fever. Her cheeks were faintly sunburned, too. It had been slightly hotter the last several days. Because of that, her body felt a little languid.

But it was not to the point where she was unable to fight.

She could still fulfill her duty...for the time being, at least.

“I’m all right...”

The analytical fluid within the container changed to a color never before seen. By rights, such a situation required an immediate report.

However, she returned the container to its case as if nothing had happened.

“I’m...all right, so...”

She murmured toward the mirror, almost as if she was saying it to herself.

She could not distance herself from the island—not yet. She could not avert her eyes from him.

After all, she was the boy’s watcher.

Yes. For the time being, at least...



The sea, in the deep of night—

Above the water, nearly three hundred kilometers to the south of Tokyo, a

lone aircraft began its descent.

It was a huge, amphibious craft equipped with four turboprop engines. It doubled as a flying boat, capable of landing on lakes, marshes, or the surface of the sea.

Both the craft's total length and wingspan exceeded forty meters, too large to be a flying boat under civilian ownership. The craft, embellished with a crimson border, glimmered as it reflected the silvery moonlight. A crest upon its wings depicted a chariot drawn by a winged dragon. It was the crest of the Warlord's Empire—the Dominion that ruled Europe.

The flying boat *Strix* lowered its altitude, finally touching down upon the moonlit ocean. Ferociously scattering sea spray all about, it began to glide upon the water's surface. In front of it was an island—a small city floating upon the Pacific Ocean. It was an artificial isle built with carbon fiber, resin, metal, and magic.

A single, seafaring vessel was moored in the harbor the *Strix* was approaching. It was a majestic cruise ship reminiscent of a floating fortress. The flag hoisted upon the ship's mast was emblazoned with the same emblem of the Warlord's Empire. The boat's name was *Oceanus Grave II*—marking this as the personal ship of Dimitrie Vattler, ruler of the dukedom of Ardeal and a great noble of the Warlord's Empire.

The *Strix* drew close to that enormous vessel as it came to a halt. Its enormous white wake quietly dissolved into the waves, and the surface of the sea became black and mirrorlike once more.

The craft's upper hatch opened, and an individual emerged on the *Strix*'s wing.

He was a tall, thin man with a dark complexion. His age was difficult to discern. From his facial features alone, he seemed young, and yet, the solemn calm enveloping him resembled that of a cunning warrior or elder statesman. The wisdom plainly visible on his weathered face was a good fit for his old-fashioned coat and long black hair.

“ ... ”

Looking up at the resplendent cruise ship, the man sighed loudly in annoyance. He did not sense the presence of any crewmen from the enormous hull floating amid the nighttime mist. The tranquility was enough to make the ship seem adrift.

Narrowing his eyes in apparent caution, the man surrounded his environs with a golden mist. He was attempting to transfer himself to the upper deck of the *Oceanus Grave II*. That instant, as if awaiting a momentary lapse, a light dyed the area above his head blue.

Immense demonic energy, enough to instantly slay a normal human, fell from the sky above.

The surge warped in the night sky, transforming into a completely dark serpent.

This was a concentration of demonic energy vast enough to take physical form—a vampire's Beast Vassal. The beast summoned from another world, huge enough to bury the man's entire field of vision, ferociously bared its fangs, attacking without warning.

The man's expression remained unchanged as he clicked his tongue in revulsion.

He was still as a huge sword appeared before his eyes—a dark great sword with a seven-or eight-meter blade. Of course, it was far too great a size for any proper human being to wield. Yet...

“...Dance, Ghoula.”

Seemingly expertly wielded by an invisible hand, the sword rent space itself, impaling the enormous serpent's maw.

The surface of the blade writhed like countless fangs tearing into flesh, and demonic energy spewed from the hilt like flames. The man's sword was a weapon with a will of its own. It, too, was a vampire's Beast Vassal.

However, even with that magic sword impaling it, the serpent's demonic energy did not wane. Its huge, writhing frame transformed into a blast of wind, about to smash the man flat—and the flying boat along with him.

Countless swords intercepted this, breaking it apart. The short swords freshly summoned by the man stitched the surge of demonic energy to the nighttime sky, bringing it to a halt. Both sets of demonic energy collided, jostling with each other, and a high-pitched creak sounded. And then—

“Have you had your fill, Master of Serpents?” the dark-haired man called out with another annoyed, deep sigh.

A moment later, the vast demonic energy filling the surface of the sea vanished without a trace, as if it had been nothing but an illusion.

In its place, a golden mist appeared before the man’s eyes. The particles, like sand falling out of thin air, became a handsome young man. He was a blond, blue-eyed vampire, wearing a bright-white coat that was vivid even in night vision.

Baring his white fangs, the young man—Dimitrie Vattler—cracked an amused smile.

One would never think someone with such a broad, innocent-looking smile would launch a surprise attack with a Beast Vassal.

“Is that not a boorish thing to say upon our reunion after so long, Velesh Aradah!?”

The black-haired man named Aradah! returned a fixed stare at Vattler and coldly declared, “I did not come to this backwater island to put up with your equally boorish hobby.”

Vattler narrowed his eyes as he listened to the man’s words with apparent satisfaction. Aradah! was one of the few people who could withstand a serious attack from Vattler, and he was one of his few friends of equal standing. Hence, Vattler was obligated to display commensurate etiquette. From Vattler’s point of view, attacking Aradah! upon meeting him was merely paying proper respect.

“Well then, from the top—Mr. Velesh Aradah!, chairman of the Imperial Assembly of the Warlord’s Empire. I, Vattler, am extremely honored and humbly delighted that you have descended to this most distant land.”

“Vattler, are you *trying* to annoy me? You’re the one who orchestrated this whole affair to begin with. The Fourth Primogenitor, the Priestess of Cain, and

on top of that, Glenda, the Dragon of the Swamp... You've done a fine job lining up one messy situation after another." Aradah!l's cheeks twisted as he glared at the young blond aristocrat respectfully bowing his head.

"Keh," Vattler chuckled, letting the sound out of his throat as he smiled at his friend's sober and serious response. "That was rude of me, Aradah!, but may I take your having come to this island as meaning the elders of the Council finally feel like coming on board?"

"It's not something they can let go, I'm sure. Not when they are aware that the Coffin has been opened." The black-haired vampire sighed and turned his sights overhead. "And besides..."

A small-statured girl was standing on the deck of the cruise ship *Oceanus Grave II*. She had rainbowlike hair that periodically changed color, flickering like flames. As she smiled charmingly, white fangs poked out from the gap between her lips.

"The sixth Kaleid Blood, I take it..., " Aradah!l murmured.

"Yes...the final Key to the Feast, previously sheltered by the Chaos Bride." Vattler's lips curled upward ferociously.

The girls dubbed Kaleid Bloods were all artificially produced vampires for sealing a Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor. There were twelve in total, but eleven of those seals had already been broken.

As for what would happen when the current, incomplete Fourth Primogenitor gained Hektos's Beast Vassal, this was completely unknown even to Vattler and Aradah!l in spite of their centuries of life. The one and only so-called fact they knew with complete certainty was this: The emergence of the Fourth Primogenitor, a being that ought not to exist, would throw the world order's stability into chaos.

Aradah!l remained expressionless as he watched his old friend continue to smile.

"We have gained our king's forbearance. But, Vattler—do you truly understand what it means to cause the complete revival of the Fourth Primogenitor? What is your real objective?"

“Why, does that not go without saying, Aradah! Past or present, I have never changed. There is only one thing I desire—”

Spreading both arms wide in a theatrical fashion, Vattler silently shifted his gaze behind him. There, glittering brilliantly on the moonlit sea, rested the man-made Demon Sanctuary. A glint resembling roaring flames flickered in the young aristocrat’s eyes as he gazed upon it.

Then he gave his reply—and he kept it concise:

“War.”



CHAPTER ONE
THE FALSE IDOL

CHAPTER ONE

THE FALSE IDOL

1

Several drops of translucent red fluid trickled onto the small spoon.

A sweet yet savory aroma spread throughout the surrounding area.

“It’s perfect...”

The Fourth Primogenitor, Kojou Akatsuki—also called the World’s Mightiest Vampire—sniffed the air in a daze. Filling his mouth with the warm liquid, he turned it over on the tip of his tongue, relishing the taste. Enraptured, he closed his eyes, and a smile of satisfaction came over his face. Slowly, he released a sigh of ecstasy.

“This really is the best... Feels like strength’s welling up throughout my whole body.” Kojou shuddered as he gripped the spoon.

In her apron as she gazed at her older brother—frankly creeped out by him—stood Nagisa Akatsuki.

“Um, Kojou?”

“Sorry, Kanase. I’m digging in... It’s cool, I’m just gonna have one more sip to sample the flavor... Heh-heh-heh...”

Invoking the name of his absent underclassman, Kojou once again brought the crimson liquid to his mouth. This time, he made an exaggerated slurping noise and swallowed it all in a single gulp.

“Hey, Kojou, hold on.”

“Mmm... Garlic stir-fried in olive oil, cherrywood-smoked bacon, fresh onions, carrots, and cabbage with Lombardy-grown tomatoes thrown in... And on top of

that, it makes full use of herb salt for the hidden flavor of a perfect minestrone. Truly the ultimate masterpiece, don't you think?"

Kojou, intoxicated on the taste of the soup he had cooked on his own, did not notice his little sister addressing him. "Just one more sip," he murmured to himself, lifting the ladle he had used to mix the concoction in the large pot.

"Hey, Kojou! Are you listening?!"

"Whoa!"

Nagisa, finally coming to a boil, raised her voice right in Kojou's ear.

Clearly startled, Kojou stiffened as he finally regained his senses.

"Nagisa... What gives?"

"Don't 'what gives?' me. What are you doing, sneaking a bite all by yourself? Kano and Yukina have been working nonstop, you know."

Kojou and Nagisa were inside a temporary tent providing shelter for a food cart placed in the corner of a large public park. A simplified kitchen had been set up behind a separating screen, and a large quantity of minestrone soup was boiling on top of a commercial-grade gas stove. The four jumbo pots contained portions for roughly three hundred people. Just cooking it all had been fairly heavy labor. He felt like it was forgivable to swipe a tiny snack, at least...

"My bad. I just wanted to taste it. Is the other stuff sorted out?"

"Not even close. There might be even more people than yesterday. Everyone heard about the food then, so now everyone's going out of their way to grab a bite. The charity organizers did put up numbered tickets, but that last line stretched all the way out of the park. The pot out front looks like it's finally empty."

Nagisa fired off a detailed explanation. Kojou poked his head out from behind the screen to survey the state of affairs in the park; the line of people leading up to the tent easily surpassed two hundred from what he could see. The number had clearly increased from the last time he'd checked a little earlier.

"I get it, I get it. You just finished seasoning it, so I'll haul it out right away."

"Please do. And then, if you have a minute, help Yukina clear out the plates,

please!”

“Sure thing.”

Watching his little sister race off, Kojou let a strained smile sneak onto his face.

When his underclassman friend Kanon Kanase asked for help with her volunteer work, he’d thought it would be a plainer and more solemn affair, but the actual events had gone quite contrary to his expectations. If he had to compare, distributing food to a huge oncoming crowd was more like a festival or a sporting event. As a former athlete, Kojou didn’t mind a boisterous atmosphere like that.

The food he was carrying was actually for the ordinary residents of Itogami Island.

Many of those present were victims of a terrorist attack in which a group of people had hacked into demon registration bracelets two weeks prior. It became known as the Roses of Tartarus incident. Blessed with a high-quality medical system, the Demon Sanctuary had miraculously gone without fatalities, but urban areas had suffered a great deal from indiscriminately summoned Beast Vassals going on a rampage. Homes had been destroyed, and many people were forced to live in evacuation shelters. Kojou and the others were visiting a section of the city that had suffered particularly heavy damage.

In front of the tent, volunteer staffers were distributing soup and rice balls to people. Yukina Himeragi was one of the seven or eight staff members present.

“Sorry I’m late. Here’s the soup!”

“Ah, senpai, thank you very much.”

Noticing Kojou precariously carrying a large pot, Yukina rushed over in concern. Unlike her normal attire, having her hair tied up under a nurse’s cap was a new look for her.

Behind her was a table with numerous wrapped rice balls arranged tightly together.

As a matter of fact, the temporary tent was host to a product more popular

than pork miso, or minestrone soup, or standard on-the-go food. At some point, rumor seemed to have spread that particularly cute middle school girls were distributing hand-shaped rice balls—*for free*—and as a result, a great number of disaster victims had gathered from all across Itogami Island in search of this food.

That turned into publicity, which in turn brought the support of other charitable organizations, resulting in a fairly large amount of donations; the world truly was beyond human comprehension. Because the result was aid to the disaster victims, he supposed he ought to consider it a good thing...

“You must be tired, Himeragi. Did you make all these?”

“Yes. We’re out of rice, so these are the last of them,” she fretted, her eyelashes falling as she removed her nylon cooking gloves.

“That so? Glad there was enough, then...”

Kojou couldn’t hide the encroaching grimace as he gazed down at the empty rice cooker.

The line mostly consisted of people looking for the girls’ handmade rice balls. He could easily imagine their dejection if they learned that there weren’t any more. *Not like there’ll be a riot or anything...right...?* he wondered, suddenly worried.

“Gotta say, that’s a huge number of people out early in the morning.”

“I believe that hot food bolsters everyone’s spirits. After all, it would appear they haven’t finished restoring the gas and water to this area yet,” Yukina replied in a serious tone.

“R-right.” Kojou nodded vaguely. *It’s probably better if I don’t tell her about the photo of her and the others that’s been spread all over the net,* he thought.

All the same, Itogami Island’s food situation had improved in the two weeks since the Roses of Tartarus incident. There was no longer any danger that food provided at the shelter would be the only place where victims could get a meal.

If push came to shove, the objective of the current volunteer work was to bolster the mood and provide some joy to the disaster victims. By that measure,

it was no exaggeration to say that Yukina and the others had already more than fulfilled their roles.

Even as Kojou mulled it over, people in search of provisions were showing up one after another, and the food prepared for them was dwindling at an incredible rate. The volunteer staffers were hastily running to refresh the food and paper plates. One silver-haired, blue-eyed girl vividly stood out from the rest—Kanon Kanase.

“Ah, Akatsuki.”

Kanon, carrying a large cardboard box, came to a stop when she noticed Kojou.

Having lived in a convent when she was young, Kanon had a wealth of knowledge about charitable activities. Even among those involved with the current relief effort, it was she, the youngest of all the staff, who held everyone’s trust. In addition to her beautiful looks that were far from the Japanese norm, she was very popular with the disaster victims. However, put nicely, Kanon had a gentle personality; put not so nicely, she was slightly... oblivious. With the aid distribution on its way to becoming a war zone, she clearly wasn’t the right person for the current job.

Kanon smiled and meandered around the cramped, cluttered tent. “Perfect timing. I had something to speak with you about—”

There was no time for Kojou to even say *Wait*. Kojou and Yukina stared in concern when, before their eyes, Kanon did just as expected, tripping over something and losing her balance.

“Ah...”

“Whoa?!”

“Kano—?!”

Kanon’s body, in danger of tumbling right over, was caught by Kojou at the very last moment. He held the petite Kanon up with only his left hand, with Yukina catching the cardboard box as it fell.

“You all right, Kanase?”

“A-Akatsuki, Yukina. I’m very sorry.”

Still held up by Kojou’s embrace, Kanon gave a gentle smile. It was a pristine, sublime expression befitting her nickname, the Saint of Middle School.

Kojou was momentarily captivated by her smiling face, and Kanon formally bowed her head.

“Thank you very much for today. Yukina, thank you, as well.”

With Kanon’s serene eyes gazing at him, Kojou averted his, blushing. “Ah, nah, all I did was get some soup ready. It was pretty fun helping, actually.”

For her part, Yukina seemed embarrassed as she slumped her shoulders, a sigh trickling out as she said, “Yes. Besides, the damage to Itogami Island this time around is not something unrelated to us.”

“W-well, yeah...”

Kojou subconsciously put a hand to his own chest as an awkward feeling came over him. After all, Kojou and Yukina were right there when the Demon Sanctuary destruction group, Tartarus Lapse, destroyed Itogami Island’s Great Pile. The food stockpile had been set ablaze right before their eyes and there was nothing they could do about it. Even at that very moment, one of Tartarus Lapse’s ringleaders slept inside of Kojou as the eleventh beast vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor. For such reasons, Kojou simply couldn’t help but feel responsible for the fact that Itogami Island had food scarcity.

“Well, it just means you shouldn’t worry ’bout us. The more I work, the less guilty I feel.”

“Understood. But I truly am grateful to you both.”

Kanon, who shouldn’t have been aware of the finer details, did not press them for answers; she merely spoke with a gentle, charming smile. Then she gestured with a finger to indicate her wristwatch as she said:

“Also, I was thinking it is best if we finally head to school after this.”

“Huh? It’s that time already? So that’s why I was feeling hungry...”

Bewildered, Kojou looked to the clock placed in the park.

At some point, the time had drawn close to eight AM. If they didn't hurry, they'd be late for school.

Fortunately, many of the volunteer staffers were college students with more time to spare. Kojou and the others had been told beforehand there would be no problem if they left partway through.

However, thanks to having helped with the supplies since early morning, Kojou's appetite was already back with a vengeance. The rice balls laid out before him looked irresistible.

As if seeing through Kojou's gloomy thoughts, Yukina waited for Kanon to leave before offering him something. With both hands, she was holding a small plate that had a few rice balls sitting on top.

"Um, you can have this, if you'd like. I set one aside for you."

"Whoa, really? You sure it's okay?"

"Yes. I don't know if it will suit your tastes, however..."

"Nah, I appreciate it. I'm starving."

Taking the paper plate offered to him, Kojou swiftly bit into a rice ball. It was freshly made and still warm, and the seaweed was pleasantly crisp. The shape was a little off, as one would expect from a homemade rice ball, but it was impressive nonetheless. The ingredients were the standard grilled salmon and dried plum, and mustard mayonnaise for flavor. Yukina watched as Kojou stuffed his face without another word. Her gaze seemed almost affectionate.

"—Um, Himeragi, aren't you gonna eat something?"

"I'm not particularly hungry... Oh, how does it taste?" asked Yukina, almost like she was forcing a change of subject.

Kojou, chewing on the second rice ball, nodded as he gave his judgment: "This is surprisingly good."

"Oh. 'Surprisingly'...hmm? ...Is that so...?"

"Uh...Himeragi?"

"No, don't worry about it. I'll pour some tea."

Kojou shot Yukina a questioning look as she departed with a sulky air about her. When Kanon returned, she and Yukina passed each other at the back entrance to the tent.

“Excuse me, Akatsuki.”

“Kanase...? What is it?”

“This is... I made you some rice balls, Akatsuki.”

Kojou blinked as he looked from Kanon’s expression to the paper plate she was offering him.

“Erm... Kanase, you made these? For me?”

“Yes. I would like you to eat them...if it pleases you.”

“R-right... Thanks. I appreciate it. I—I was starving,” Kojou stammered.

He accepted the plate from Kanon even though he was sated after having just eaten Yukina’s rice balls. When he saw Kanon’s expression full of anticipation, he simply could not refuse.

Kanon’s rice balls were roughly the same size as Yukina’s, but she seemed to have devoted a lot of attention to them, for she had piled a total of ten atop the plate in a pyramid formation. Kojou hardened his resolve as he picked one up. Though his stomach still had a fair bit of room left, it was undeniable that his eating pace had slowed.

As Kojou ate, Kanon stared at him, her eyes full of concern as she asked, “Does the taste not agree with you?”

“Nah, it’s tasty. Yep, really tasty.” Kojou shook his head as he stuffed more food into his mouth.

Kanon patted her chest in relief. “I’m so glad.”

Thanks to her staring at him, he felt pressured to continue, and in the end, his stomach bulged with the entirety of the rice-ball mountain.

“Th-thanks for that.”

“It was no trouble.”

After miraculously cleaning his plate, Kojou brought his hands together in

thanks, and Kanon lowered her head in a bow. As she cleared the utensils away, Kojou wheezed and stared at the sky.

“Are you all right, senpai?”

Yukina, who’d returned at some point, spoke with an exasperated look as she poured tea into a paper cup. Apparently, she’d been watching the entire time he was eating Kanon’s rice balls.

Kojou gratefully accepted the tea she’d poured as he said, “I...guess I ate too much.”

“Goodness, what were you thinking? Here, you have a grain of rice on your face.”

With a sigh, Yukina picked the rice off Kojou’s cheek. He laughed weakly, already bereft of the willpower to make excuses. He had eaten a total of thirteen rice balls. Assuming each one weighed about a hundred grams on average, he calculated that he’d eaten thirteen hundred grams of white rice in total. Though he was the World’s Mightiest Vampire, Kojou’s stomach was at its limit.

“Sorry for the trouble, Himeragi.”

“No need to apologize. I watch over you, senpai. This is the least I can—”

Yukina was speaking with a lively expression when, suddenly, they heard a boisterous patter of footsteps. Nagisa stormed into the back of the tent and ripped off her apron.

“Kojou!”

“—?!”

Yukina was still touching Kojou’s cheek. Her back trembled as she jumped away. Kojou coughed loudly as he looked back and said:

“N-Nagisa?! What gives, all of a sudden?!”

“Why do you two seem so surprised...?”

Nagisa, seeing Kojou’s and Yukina’s overly dramatic reactions, tilted her head with a mystified look. Then, she beamed with pride and produced the paper

plate she was hiding behind her back.

“Well, whatever. Anyway, I made rice balls!”

“Huh?”

“We really need to head to school now, but you didn’t have time to eat breakfast, right, Kojou? I made these just for you, so make sure to savor them when you eat them. I mean, I even picked out the ingredients you like: cod roe and tuna with mayo!”

As the words spilled from her mouth, Nagisa pressed the paper plate toward him. Sitting on it were two rice balls so humongous that they easily protruded over the edges.

“R-right... Thanks. I—I appreciate it. I was s-starving...”

Unable to turn away his little sister’s good will, Kojou thanked her with a trembling voice. Nagisa put on a big smile.

“I thought so! Now hurry and eat up before someone catches you. There are still plenty of people lined up out front waiting their turn, you know!”



“Ha...ha-ha...” Kojou laughed weakly, staring at Nagisa’s offering with a desperate look on his face. “Thanks for the food,” he said, closing his eyes with a horrified expression as he wolfed down the rice balls, almost as if he meant to eat the plate along with them.

“.....”

Yukina watched him with a sigh before closing her eyes out of pity.

2

When Kojou finally made it to his homeroom, there was still some time before class started. Overeating had taken its toll on him, and he looked about ready to keel over. In desperate need of a break, Kojou headed toward his seat. However...

“Ah, he’s here! Akatsuki, over here, over here!”

“Tanahara?”

...As soon as he entered the classroom, Kojou’s classmate Yuuho Tanahara flagged him down. The two of them had been classmates since middle school, so he liked to think he knew her pretty well. Unable to ignore the loud-voiced girl calling out to him, Kojou reluctantly sat in front of Yuuho.

The heck does she want? thought Kojou as Yuuho pointed at an empty desk by the windowsill and said, “Hey, Akatsuki. You been in touch with Asagi Aiba lately?”

“Asagi? Ah...so she’s out today, too?” Surveying the classroom, Kojou spoke with an air of composure.

Asagi hadn’t been to school even once since the Tartarus Lapse incident. Apparently, she’d been holed up at the Gigafloat Management Corporation, helping with the restoration of Itogami Island. The only reason Kojou wasn’t worried about Asagi was because they texted every day. Most of her texts were about her work for the Corporation or complaints about the food they were giving her, but...

“Come to think of it, the message she sent yesterday was pretty long. She was talking about how her part-time job was killing her, or something...”

“Oh yeah? She’s definitely not coming to school today, then. That’s tough... I promised my cousin in elementary school I’d send him a photo of Asagi and me...”

Yuuho’s small nose wrinkled as she murmured her disappointment and fiddled with the smartphone in her hand.

“Your little cousin...?” Kojou asked, shooting her a look of confusion. “Why would a little kid want a photo of Asagi?”

“Well, that’s because he’s a fan,” Yuuho explained as if it was nothing. “He was super-happy when I told him that I’m Asagi’s classmate.”

“Huh... It’s almost like she’s an idol, or something.”

Kojou let the words trickle out, as if he didn’t even realize he was thinking out loud. Even after hearing that Asagi had a young fan, it didn’t seem real; it just didn’t click.

Kojou’s demeanor, ignorant to his peril, made Yuuho a bit irritated as she raised her voice.

“She’s not *like* an idol, she *is* an idol. I mean she’s, like, the savior of Itogami Island, stopping a group of terrorists with international arrest warrants all by herself. Of course she’s popular. Well, she’s only a local idol here on Itogami Island...”

“So it’s a localized fame thing, like a place’s famous general from the Warring States period, or their mascot, or something like that.”

“W-well, I suppose. But it seems like she’s a topic everywhere on the mainland. I mean, Asagi’s actually pretty hot. Although, she tried too hard to be fashionable, and it started going in a weird direction...”

“Um, well, that’s fine, isn’t it? If it suits her, it’s all good, right?”

Kojou recalled Asagi’s needlessly extravagant hairstyle and clothing as he found himself defending her. She certainly did seem to be flailing at times, but he didn’t exactly mind her putting so much effort into her appearance.

Yuuho curled up the corners of her mouth in mild amusement as she teased, “I’m a little surprised to hear you say that, Akatsuki.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really. Well, that’s fine. Ah, before I forget. Akatsuki, do you have a photo of Asagi on you?”

Yuuho’s lips loosened into a leering smile as she changed topics. Kojou knit his brows, thrown off course.

“Photo?”

“Yes, yes. Something private, not one of those class picture things.”

“My smartphone got broken, and I only just replaced it. Wonder if there is anything like that on here.”

He took out his smartphone. The crucial data had been transferred, but there weren’t many photos left over in the process.

“Ah, there is. The one from when we went to Blue Elysium last year.”

“Eh, Blue Ely?! That’s incredible. Blue Ely means, what, she’s in a swimsuit?!”

Yuuho leaned forward, acting excited. Kojou shook his head, a half-hearted expression coming over him as he said, “Ah, well, technically she’s in a swimsuit, but...”

“...What the heck is this?” Yuuho fumed, shooting Kojou an accusatory glare.

The picture showed Kojou and Asagi at Blue Elysium. Both were wearing lame T-shirts, holding a metal container and a *yakisoba* pack, respectively.

“Well, um, this is the photo from when Asagi and I went to Blue Ely. We worked part-time at a *yakisoba* stand.”

“This isn’t the kind of photo I wanted to see! And what the hell’s so private about this?!”

“There’s also the one of her at the all-you-can-eat fried chicken bar. After that, there’s the commemorative photo for eating all the special ramen at a contest...”

“Those are just photos of her eating! Why is it that all you have are photos

that would only serve to shatter the image of an innocent little kid's idol?!"

Yuuho's voice was ragged.

Even if you put it like that..., Kojou thought, sighing before he said, "That's why there's no way she can pull off being an idol. The heck are you people expecting out of Asagi?"

"When you put it that way, you've got a point, I guess."

Yuuho's cheeks puffed up in a pout. Asagi was a beauty as long as she kept her mouth shut, but she was the type without any sensuality to go with her looks. She was spoiled rotten, she didn't have a bubbly personality, and she couldn't care less what other people thought of her. Kojou actually liked those blunt traits of hers, but he knew they weren't traits befitting the typical idol.

However, Yuuho looked like she wasn't ready to give in just yet. She grabbed Kojou's smartphone without his permission and connected to a website. A song began to play, and he immediately recognized the singer's voice.

"But Asagi's promotional video was fun and adorable, totally legit idol stuff. Here, look."

"Ah, that?"

Gazing at the video, Kojou shrugged his shoulders. The title was "Save Our Sanctuary"—a charity song produced by the Gigafloat Management Corporation, broadcast all over the island to support the Itogami Island revival effort.

Asagi was singing it while wearing a pure-white summer dress. If someone twisted his arm, he'd admit that the sight of her walking barefoot along a beach in the video was pretty idol-like. She was owning it. Apparently, it had gotten a positive reception. But, put bluntly, Kojou didn't care for that image of her at all.

As if seeing straight through to Kojou's heart, Yuuho raised one eyebrow as she said, "Oh my. What's wrong? You don't like it, Akatsuki?"

"Not really. It just feels...off, somehow."

"Hmmm. Well, that's... I suppose you're right. You must feel like Asagi's

suddenly riding off into the sunset.”

That was a good one, thought Yuuho as she jumped to conclusions. Although Kojou thought there was obviously some misunderstanding, clearing up the confusion would be a pain, so Kojou just let it be. *Well, it's no big deal*, he thought, taking back his smartphone and heading to his seat for real this time.

As he did, a tall, mature-looking high school girl spoke to Kojou along the way. It was Rin Tsukishima, the class representative. With sound coursing from Kojou's smartphone, she looked at it like it was some sort of novelty.

“Good morning, Akatsuki. What are you watching?” she asked.

“Ah, Tsukishima. Some sort of promotional video by Asagi, apparently.”

“The Itogami Island Revival Support Project song?” Rin gave the smartphone a scornful glance, shaking her head as if losing all interest when she said, full of invective for some reason, “It's well shot, but it's fake.”

“Fake?”

“Yeah. I'm thinking magic or CGI. I don't think Asagi went and participated herself, either.”

“I see... So that's why, huh?”

Kojou's face suddenly turned serious as he stared at the Asagi on the screen. He paused the video app when it showed a close-up of the girl he was so familiar with.

“...So that's why.”

Rin stared at Kojou with a sharp look in her eyes. Unable to discern what came after the cutoff, she scrutinized Kojou's conflicted face as he said:

“I knew something was off about it. It didn't seem like Asagi at all.”

The instant she heard his explanation, Rin went *Heh*, breaking into a soft, charming smile. She gazed at Kojou with a gentle smile, almost as if to say *I've raised my estimation just a little*.

“At times, it's hard to tell whether you're dense or sharp, Akatsuki.”

“What's that supposed to mean? Anyway, how'd you know it was fake,

Tsukishima?”

“Earrings.”

Rin’s expression remained unchanged as she made the blunt, single-word statement. Kojou, looking like the village idiot, peered back at her and said:

“Huh?”

“The color of her earrings is different.”

“Ah, now that you mention it...”

When the promotional video was shot, Asagi was wearing red earrings Kojou didn’t recognize. From the looks of it, they were the expensive kind embedded with large gemstones. Asagi always wore her favorite blue earrings, which certainly gave off a very different impression.

“Wait, that’s all?”

“It’s enough. Asagi would never go without them, let alone put on a different pair.”

“R-right...”

With Rin crisply refuting him, Kojou could offer no rebuttal. If Rin, Asagi’s close friend, went as far as saying that, Kojou could not help but trust her.

“Besides, singing and dancing are hardly Asagi’s specialties. That girl tries to hide it, but she’s actually quite tone-deaf.”

“Y...yeah.”

This time, Kojou agreed when Rin laid out the unvarnished truth. As a matter of fact, Kojou was well aware that Asagi hated karaoke. Neither the sound nor richness of her voice were poor, but for some reason, singing was a no-go.

Even if it was for Itogami Island’s revival, he didn’t think Asagi would sing in front of people. If she had to sing, she’d probably just break out her PC and design synthetic voice software from scratch to do the singing for her.

And if Asagi’s singing was fake, it wasn’t strange to assume that the entire promo video was fake from top to bottom. Now that he’d begun to suspect one portion, he couldn’t think of the girl in the video and Asagi as being the same

person at all.

It didn't matter much to Kojou and the others whether the promo video was real or fake. One often heard of idol songs and photos being edited, and there was no way Asagi would make a career out of being an idol anyway.

The problem was not the existence of a fake Asagi. The problem was, why was the Gigafloat Management Corporation building Asagi up as an idol, to the point it had provided a counterfeit?

And there was one more question on his mind.

“.....”

Kojou was still pursing his lips when he swung his legs over his chair and sat. Even after the chime indicated the start of classes, he couldn't stop wondering.

After all, he'd been told the reason for Asagi's absence from school was that she was supporting Itogami Island's reconstruction. But if her activities toward that end were fake to begin with...

...where was the real Asagi now, and what was she up to?

3

“A fake...you say? Of Aiba??”

After classes that day, Yukina had been waiting for Kojou outside the school gate. Once they met up, they took a walk over to the general hospital in Island West. They meant to pay a visit to Motoki Yaze, who'd been injured during the Roses of Tartarus incident.

Caught up in a Tartarus Lapse attack aimed at Asagi, Yaze had suffered magical damage and blood loss, temporarily falling into a coma, but he'd returned to his normal self after a week in the hospital and was now energetic enough to request that candy and junk food be brought along on their latest visit.

“That's just what a girl in my class said, so it's not like there's hard proof or anything...,” Kojou said as he toyed with the pass token for the regular school

train.

Several days earlier, large posters for the Itogami Island Revival Support Project had been plastered all over the monorail station, restored to service only the day before. Of course, Asagi's photo was on the main poster. Certainly, the Asagi flashing a perfect idol smile was a completely different person from the Asagi Kojou was used to.

"But we haven't seen Aiba once since she vanished after the Roses of Tartarus, have we...?"

She had such good intuition that she might well have realized something was off with the videos of Asagi flooding the city long before Kojou had noticed.

"She's been messaging me every day, so I hadn't been all that worried, but... now that I think about it rationally, who knows if it was really Asagi typing them out."

"True. At the very least, it would be good if we could contact Aiba directly..."

"Even if we went to see her, there's no way they'd let us in easily. Her phone's been going straight to voicemail this whole time, too."

"Aiba has become quite famous, hasn't she? She's even become a hot topic among middle schoolers."

Yukina spoke as they passed through the station's automatic ticket gate. *Guess she really has*, thought Kojou, only belatedly appreciating the fact. Apparently, Asagi's activities as a local idol had spread to the general public more than Kojou had imagined.

"Well, let's just talk to Yaze for now. He might have a clue about what's going on," Kojou murmured as they exited the station.

Motoki Yaze was Asagi's childhood friend, and his older brother was a senior executive of the Gigafloat Management Corporation. It was a lot faster and more reliable to have Yaze look into the situation than to have the two of them wander around worried.

The hospital where Yaze was staying was an eye-catching building in front of the station. They'd already visited a number of times, so they knew his room

number.

The pair went to the reception desk, obtained hospital passes with their names on them, and boarded the elevator. However, just as they arrived at Yaze's room, the two came to a stop, dumbfounded.

"Huh...?"

Kojou's voice trickled out as he surveyed the empty hospital room's interior, sounding incredulous. The bed Yaze had been using had been very tidily made, and all his personal belongings were missing.

At some point, the admitted patient nameplate that had been hanging on the hospital room door had been removed. It seemed he'd been discharged without Kojou knowing.

"Are you Yaze's friends?"

A passing female nurse called out to Kojou as he stood rooted to the spot. He'd seen the young nurse a number of times during previous visits.

"Ah, yes. When did he get discharged?" Kojou asked, a dissatisfied look regarding at Yaze coming over him. There was a hint of conflict in the nurse's smile as she said:

"Perhaps he wasn't discharged, but transferred? His older brother visited last night and left with him," the nurse explained. She raised a finger in front of her lips in an adorable gesture, the sort one used when dealing with little kids. "But that's a secret."

"Yaze's older brother, huh?"

"There were quite a few bodyguards. Yaze's father is a big shot at the Gigafloat Management Corporation, so I can understand their concern..."

The nurse then let out a small sigh. The father of the Yaze brothers—Akishige Yaze—was the chairman emeritus of the Gigafloat Management Corporation. He had been a target during the Roses of Tartarus incident. Even at that moment, it was still unclear whether he was dead or alive.

As a result, Akishige's seat had been passed to the Yaze family by way of inheritance, and ferocious horse trading was apparently underway. If anything,

it made sense to be extra wary of assassinations against the Yaze brothers.

Perhaps Yaze's sudden transfer to another hospital was related to those circumstances. Not contacting Kojou and Yukina about it was probably a security measure.

"Do you know which hospital Yaze was transferred to?" Kojou asked, but the nurse smiled and shook her head.

"I'm afraid not. But I wouldn't be able to tell you even if I did."

"That figures."

With a deep sigh, Kojou thanked the nurse and left the hospital room. He trudged heavily down the corridor, got into the elevator, and headed out of the hospital.

Noticing Kojou brooding, Yukina looked up at the side of his face and asked, seemingly to herself, "I wonder what all of this means?"

"Dunno." Kojou weakly raised both hands in a noncommittal gesture. "A transfer's no big deal, but the no contact part bugs me. It's not like Yaze's big brother has a reason to kidnap his younger brother, so there's probably no need to worry, but..."

Yaze's transfer. And Asagi's prolonged absence. Both were somewhat special circumstances, but neither action had unnatural elements to them. Kojou and Yukina had no reason to worry.

But all of a sudden, he'd lost all means of contact with the friends who had continued to stand at his side, and he couldn't find any rhyme or reason to it. That was what made Kojou worry. He tried sending Yaze a text message for peace of mind, but as he expected, there was no reply whatsoever.

"Senpai?"

When Kojou stopped in the middle of a crosswalk, Yukina looked at him in confusion.

"Oh, it's... I was thinking, I'm pretty sure Asagi's place is close to this hospital."

"Is that so?"

“I vaguely remembered, somehow...”

Yukina blinked in confusion as Kojou nodded to himself. It was a fairly vague memory, but he remembered passing through that crossing when he’d visited Asagi’s place on New Year’s.

“We’ve come this far either way, so why not try seeing Sumire?”

“Sumire? You mean Aiba’s mother?”

“We might be able to ask her about Asagi... Ah, no need to force yourself to see her, Himeragi.”

“No, I’ll accompany you. It is at times like these that I must firmly watch your conduct, senpai. I mean, Aiba’s mother is a very pretty lady—”

Yukina spoke, an especially serious expression coming over her. Kojou spontaneously opened his eyes wide as he protested, “Hold on a sec! What are you worried about, exactly?!”

“Perhaps you should reflect upon all your actions to date.”

When Yukina glared with narrowed eyes, Kojou’s lips twisted in displeasure. Certainly, due to extenuating circumstances, he’d ended up drinking the blood of a number of girls, but there was no way he’d do the same with Asagi’s mother.....probably.

Asagi’s home was located in a corner of an affluent residential district at the top of a gently sloping hill. As he proceeded to walk past beautiful roadside trees, a familiar mansion with a very traditional style came into view.

“Hey. This is the street, right?”

“Yes, but...”

Yukina suddenly came to a halt as she gazed at the wall encircling the mansion. Kojou soon realized why. The road leading to the front of Asagi’s home was sealed off with a steel-pipe barricade.

Standing in front of the barricade were guardsmen carrying firearms.

“The Island Guard...?!” Yukina gasped, her voice quiet when she saw their uniforms.

It wasn't ordinary police blocking the road. Dubbed the Island Guard, they were anti-demon armed guardsmen under the direct command of the Gigafloat Management Corporation, charged with maintaining public order inside the Demon Sanctuary.

There were probably two squads deployed to surround the mansion—some ten-odd souls. There was an armored car parked behind the barricade. Asagi's father was a VIP who worked on the Itogami City Council, but such gratuitous fighting strength was clearly overkill for mere escort duty.

Though it was a fact the strict security made him falter for a moment, Kojou had come too far. He couldn't just turn back without doing anything. Kojou put on his best "harmless high school student" face and called out to one of the guardsmen.

"Um, excuse me. My friend's house is just up ahead—"

"Your friend's name?"

A stout guardsman kept his protective mask on as he directed his attention toward Kojou.

Kojou pointed to the mansion behind the barricade and answered, "Er... Asagi Aiba. That's Aiba's house."

"Miss Asagi Aiba, is it? Please present your permit."

"Huh? Permit?"

The guardsman's unanticipated demand made Kojou, beside himself, parrot back the words.

"Entering the area requires a permit from the Gigafloat Management Corporation. Those without one are not granted entry."

"Uh, wait a sec. I mean, I never needed a permit to come here all the time before—"

"Senpai."

When Kojou tried to debate the point, Yukina gently tugged on his arm. Kojou gasped, his expression hardening.

At some point, the armed guardsmen behind the barricade had raised their guns. The barrels of the military-style machine pistols were plainly trained on Kojou's center mass.

If Kojou tried to force his way through the barricade, there was no doubt the guardsmen would fire. That was their duty.

"Let's go, Himeragi."

Pouting, Kojou spread both arms wide and began heading back down the road. He didn't understand the circumstances, but he instinctively knew further negotiations were pointless.

But the encounter wasn't entirely fruitless. He knew one thing for sure.

He knew that the absence of the real Asagi was not something she chose. Someone was isolating her. Someone who could control even the Gigafloat Management Corporation as they willed—

"Thank you for your cooperation."

As Kojou kept walking, visibly irritated, the armed guardsman spoke those words in a businesslike tone directed at his back.

Kojou didn't turn around once.

4

Wearing her familiar school uniform, Asagi replied to the questions with a refined, smiling face. She was appearing as a guest on a channel broadcast locally on Itogami Island.

"....."

Visibly annoyed, Motoki Yaze remained on his side in bed as he watched Asagi on TV. Objectively, the scene was picture-perfect, but it played out so naturally that it felt *unnatural*. The Asagi being interviewed was a fake. Kojou and the others had probably realized something was off by now.

Put another way, it meant that unless you were someone who knew her as well as Yaze and Kojou, you'd never notice she was a fake.

He understood why the Corporation would set Asagi up as an idol to the point of perpetrating such an elaborate fraud. Itogami Island had incurred heavy damage at the hands of the Roses of Tartarus, and numerous citizens had been temporarily displaced. Itogami Island needed a charismatic symbol of recovery to deflect their irritation and dissatisfaction.

In that sense, Asagi was a most suitable candidate. She was the genius programmer who'd saved Itogami Island from the Demon Sanctuary destruction group, and on top of that, she was a genuine high school girl. That was more than enough reason to promote her and slap the label of "local idol" onto her.

And by using Asagi's image in the media, no one would notice that Asagi herself had vanished from sight. The Gigafloat Management Corporation was using her popularity to isolate the awakened Priestess of Cain from the world at large.

It really was a farce.

However, even if he had a decent grasp of the situation, there was nothing Yaze could do about it. His leg had finally healed after being shot by Tartarus Lapse, but the internal organ damage from overuse of his Hyper Adaptation power and overdose of boosters was simply too great. For a while, it would be futile to even try to monitor Kojou, let alone use his abilities in combat.

On top of that, Yaze had been unable to contact Koyomi Shizuka—one of the Three Saints of the Lion King Agency, who he called his girlfriend—ever since the incident.

In the end, all Yaze could do was look pissed off as he watched the fake Asagi on TV.

All of a sudden, the door to his hospital room opened without a knock. In walked a man who could have been the poster child for the upper class. He was Kazuma Yaze, Yaze's brother who was ten years his senior and born of a different mother.

"How are you faring, Motoki?"

Kazuma, wearing a close-fitting European-style suit, looked down at his jersey-clad younger brother as he posed the question. With naked wariness on

Yaze's face, he looked back at his older brother without a word.

Kazuma, an elite with a doctorate from a famous university in the North American Union, was chief manager of the City Administration Office of the Gigafloat Management Corporation, making him a very busy man. Yaze didn't think his older brother would pay a hospital visit without a very good reason.

"What's going on, Bro? Why'd you drag me to a place like this?" Yaze asked as he examined the unfamiliar, post-transfer hospital room.

Yaze had been brought to a hospital in Island North's research district attached to a pharmaceutical company. It was a high-tech, antiseptic building, a facility oriented toward clinical trials of new drugs rather than toward medical treatment. Immediately after being admitted, his cell phone and all other electronic devices had been confiscated; thanks to that, Yaze had been unable to inform Kojou and the others of his hospital transfer.

However, Kazuma looked back at his younger brother's annoyed face, a curious expression on his own as he asked:

"Are the accommodations not to your liking? I did ask them to give you the finest private room available."

"That ain't the problem. The hell are you thinking? You keepin' somethin' from me?"

"I will hide nothing from you. Such a thing would be meaningless." A sarcastic smile crept onto Kazuma's lips.

Yaze was a Hyper Adapter—a natural psychic who didn't rely on magic. If certain conditions were met, he was capable of overhearing the conversations of others even in places several kilometers away. Kazuma understood his younger brother's power better than anyone.

"I had you transferred for the sake of security. We would be unable to protect you in a normal hospital room, you see."

"Protect? Me...?"

The unexpected words coming from Kazuma's mouth brought an incredulous look to Yaze's face.

“Who would wanna come after a guy like me—?”

“You will succeed the Yaze family name, on the surface at least, in place of our assassinated father.”

Kazuma’s declaration interrupted his younger brother’s question. For an instant, Yaze stiffened, unable to comprehend its meaning.

“You mean I’ll...be the head of the family...?”

“That’s right. Of course, this will be in name only until you are legally an adult.”

“That’s crazy! There’s no way everyone else is gonna accept that!” Yaze shouted, forgetting he was in a hospital.

Being head of the main branch of the Yaze family meant you’d be commander in chief of a gigantic financial group, influential in the worlds of politics and business since ancient times. It wasn’t the kind of role any average joe could take on.

If you didn’t have overwhelming political backing to keep the power-hungry heavyweights of the family in check, you’d be eaten alive before long, and you’d wind up living out the rest of your days in misery.

“In the first place, I ain’t cut out to be head of the family! You’re way more suited for that than I am!”

“I am merely the child of our father’s lover. If I had at least inherited the family’s special ability, I might have been able to manage somehow, but no Hyper Adaptive power has ever manifested within me.”

Kazuma stated the cold, hard facts. Generation after generation, the Yaze family bloodline had turned out numerous excellent Hyper Adapters. Akishige Yaze, the current head, was said to possess a particularly strong power. And such power had never manifested in Kazuma. If it took unquestionable might to inherit the Yaze family name, this was the reason Kazuma could not be chosen as the successor.

“But you’re different, Motoki. You are a direct descendant of the family of the Four Forbidden Symbols. To shut up the old men so they can’t complain, you

must be the next head of the family.”

“And...what’ll you do if I say I won’t cooperate...?” Yaze asked, his voice sharp.

However, unruffled, Kazuma smiled.

“I wouldn’t particularly mind. If you abandon your right of succession, surely no one will actually make an attempt on your life. But would you be fine with that? You do realize, if it comes to that, no one will be left to protect your mother.”

“So you didn’t plan on letting me choose from the start.” Yaze fumed like a child.

Shaking his head and with no intention to apologize, Kazuma continued. “Not to worry. I’ll handle all the real work and troublesome formalities. Guardian, adviser, grant me any title you prefer. Of course, if you want to do all those things yourself, I will not stop you.”

Yaze groaned, shaking his head dramatically and flopping onto the bed. He pointed at the screen of the still-on TV. He casually asked, “Just to make one thing perfectly clear, you’re not the one who set up that farce, are you?”

“Asagi Aiba...the Priestess of Cain, yes?”

Yaze thought he heard his brother click his tongue. Kazuma knew Asagi well because she had been friends with Yaze for so long. Kazuma didn’t look upon the Gigafloat Management Corporation using Asagi any more fondly than his brother did. Knowing this, Yaze’s expression loosened a bit.

“At this point in time, there is still a chance to save her...if you cooperate with us, that is.”

“With *us*...?”

Yaze knitted his brows in response to Kazuma’s strangely casual demeanor. After all, Kazuma was implying that he had someone’s cooperation already.

Stealing the position of the head of the Yaze family and physically securing Asagi—in a certain sense, this was a revolt against the Gigafloat Management Corporation. Yaze couldn’t of a single person that would willing go along with such a reckless plan.

“What’s your angle here?” Yaze challenged.

Then he felt the wavering of the air directly behind him. Suddenly, a small-statured individual appeared in a previously empty corner of the hospital room.

“Have you finished speaking with your guardian?”

When Yaze wheeled around in surprise, he heard a voice—lispy, but haughty nonetheless. Looking over, an extravagant, frilly dress swayed in the corner of his field of vision.

“The heck are you doing here...?” Yaze exclaimed as he stared at the woman seemingly melting into view out of thin air.

In contrast to her doll-like appearance, the woman possessed a mysteriously compelling force.

She was an English teacher at Saikai Academy—and Yaze’s homeroom teacher to boot. She was also known as the Demonslayer, the cold, heartless Attack Mage who struck fear into the hearts of the sorcerous criminals of Europe.

“I owe a debt to your father and the Board of Directors of the Gigafloat Management Corporation. If you have concerns about your career options, I would be happy to discuss them with you, Motoki Yaze.”

With a broad smile, Natsuki Minamiya—the Witch of the Void—spoke those words with an amused chuckle.

5

Beneath the sun’s scorching rays, characteristic of Itogami Island, Sayaka Kirasaka stood in front of an apartment building. She carried a large instrument case for a keyboard over her left shoulder, while her right hand was pulling along a wheeled suitcase. In her right hand, Sayaka gripped a silver key.

It was a smart key, commonly used at apartment complexes, but Sayaka held it as if it were an expensive work of art.

“This is... This is the key to Yukina’s apartment...!”

Her shoulders trembled as she spoke, deeply moved.

Sayaka was looking up at the apartment building where Yukina was staying for the purpose of monitoring the Fourth Primogenitor. That day, Sayaka had been given an entry key to Yukina's room which lay just ahead.

"Receiving this means I'll be Yukina's roommate once again...! This means the Lion King Agency officially accepts cohabitation, right?!"

"Eee-hee-hee-hee!" Sayaka couldn't help letting out an eerie laugh as she released the auto-lock and entered the apartment building. Her destination was Room 705—Yukina's room. Next door, Room 704, was the residence of Yukina's target for observation, the Fourth Primogenitor—Kojou Akatsuki.

Rising to the seventh floor by elevator, Sayaka gazed at the nameplate reading AKATSUKI as she said, "I don't care for living next to Kojou Akatsuki, but one must bear goodwill toward one's neighbors, so if I must, then I must. It wouldn't be bad to at least wake him up when he oversleeps and enjoy meals together from time to time, though!"

She somehow sounded like she was making excuses as she spoke to herself, cheeks reddening. She made her way to Room 705 and unlocked the door.

"Sorry. I'm letting myself in, Yukina."

There was no sign of Yukina and Kojou having returned home. "Pardon me," Sayaka murmured in a small voice as she entered Yukina's room. On paper, the room belonged to the Lion King Agency, so Sayaka was not forbidden entry, but she still felt a smidgeon of guilt for invading someone's personal space.

But Sayaka's sense of guilt evaporated the instant she saw the room's interior.

This was because Yukina's room had next to nothing placed within it that felt indicative of a personal life.

It had a simple, some-assembly-required-style bed and cabinet, and a small dining table. This was the entirety of the furnishings added to Yukina's room. In the open closet were spare Saikai Academy uniforms and a precious few articles of personal clothing. Sayaka herself had selected and sent most of that personal clothing for Yukina.

"Ugh, I should have expected this..."

Looking around the lifeless living room, Sayaka let out an exasperated sigh.

Yukina hadn't changed at all since their time in High God Forest. Her mission for the Lion King Agency was her whole life. She stripped away all things that were unrelated to the mission. It was almost as if she was asserting that she, herself, might vanish at any moment.

It came off as just too pure, and moreover, fragile, forlorn—

It was something that really got under Sayaka's skin.

To Sayaka, who'd lost her own family at a young age, Yukina was more like a sister than any of her own blood relatives could ever be. That was why she wanted Yukina to be happy. Even if she could not escape her duty as a Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency, surely she was capable of finding a piece of happiness to call her own.

And Sayaka felt it was her duty to teach that to Yukina. In other words, she felt that she'd insufficiently made her case. She had to more thoroughly demonstrate her feelings of love, more thoroughly convey just how precious Yukina was to her. She had to tell Yukina that people would be sad if she ever disapp—

“...Wait, what?”

Sayaka's eyes fell on the front of the cabinet, which contained textbooks and the like. Something small and wooden had been placed on top—a box. Inside were things that, put bluntly, could only be described as junk: Hakone Hot Springs resort leaflets, the stub of an already-used ferry ticket, an empty candy box with a Halloween design drawn on it, and a little cat plushie that looked like something out of a game center. And a picture of Kojou Akatsuki—

In Yukina's room, one that didn't feel lived in, it was only around this little box that Sayaka sensed a gentle warmth. She didn't really want to guess at their particular significance, but she did understand that these objects were Yukina's precious memories. No doubt, many of these memories were connected to Kojou Akatsuki. That annoyed Sayaka greatly.

“Somehow, that ticks me off. Damn you, Kojou—”

Sayaka pursed her lips as she sat down on Yukina's bed.

Bringing Yukina's pillow to her face, she inhaled deeply and basked in warm, fuzzy emotions. If Yukina had found something precious to her, then Sayaka would be happy for her, but she didn't care for it having been due to Kojou Akatsuki's influence.

After all, that man was the World's Mightiest Vampire, an extremely dangerous individual, and a pervert on top of that, someone who had committed all kinds of indecent acts upon not just Yukina, but Sayaka as well. The mere presence of that man at Yukina's side made Sayaka's heart stir.

However, now that she'd obtained a key to Yukina's room, she didn't intend to let him run wild. Thereafter, Sayaka would keep Kojou Akatsuki under strict observation to see to it that he did not subject Yukina to further negative influence. In all likelihood, that was why the upper echelons of the Lion King Agency had dispatched her— No, Sayaka was sure of it.

"Hmm?"

Renewing her determination, Sayaka stood up, whereupon her expression abruptly hardened. She'd discovered a device Yukina had placed right behind the little box, almost as if trying to hide it. The unadorned device had a blunt warning sticker on its surface announcing that it was a special medical package not for sale outside the Demon Sanctuary.

"What's this...? A do-it-yourself testing kit...?"

Sayaka violently snatched up the container. The seal had been broken. Inside was the sort of analytical chemical that made an assessment based on a single drop of blood. Next to it was graph paper for estimates based on shifts in core body temperature.

"Yukina..."

When she looked at the numbers displayed on the graph paper, Sayaka paled, her lips trembling.

As if struck by nausea, her eyes remained open wide in astonishment as she sank down to the floor then and there.

Sayaka remained there, unmoving, as the rays of the setting sun filtered through a gap in the curtains, dying the side of her face red.

On the terrace of a second-story café just outside of Keystone Gate—the giant building standing at the center of Itogami Island—Kojou and Yukina were sipping their respective drinks.

Right in front of the café was the western entrance into Keystone Gate. Together with it was a see-through elevator that went to the topmost floor and a studio from which FM Itogami, Itogami City's local radio station, was broadcast. Kojou and Yukina had gone out of their way to check the place out because Asagi was supposedly being broadcast live on air. If the real Asagi was visiting the radio station, waiting there might give them a glimpse of her as she passed—or so went their faint hopes.

At any rate, they weren't the only ones who'd had that idea. People who looked like Asagi fans were gathering around the studio, waiting to catch a glimpse of her. It was clearly a stakeout. The fans on standby numbered close to thirty people in all. Most were high school students, and the ratio of male to female was around six to four in the girls' favor. Witnessing this, Kojou felt renewed appreciation for Asagi's popularity as a local idol.

"Not gonna eat, Himeragi? This place is pretty famous, apparently."

Kojou pointed at the donuts placed atop a tray as he posed the question. They'd ordered a significant amount of food so they could stay at the café for a while. All the reviews said that the donuts at this location were pretty tasty, but unfortunately, Kojou was in no condition to eat fatty foods that day. His stomach hadn't yet recovered from the onslaught of rice balls earlier that morning.

"No, I... Sorry, I am not very hungry," Yukina answered as she cast her face downward. She'd barely touched the orange juice she'd ordered. If Kojou's memory served correctly, Yukina hadn't eaten breakfast, either.

"No need to apologize, but are you all right? You're a little pale, y'know."

A wave of concern washed over Kojou's face as his eyes locked onto Yukina. He'd been worried about her ever since visiting Asagi's place, but Yukina

seemed a little frail that day. She had a fair complexion to begin with, but she looked especially pale now. Her eyes looked bleary, too, almost feverish.

But for some reason, Yukina firmly shook her head and said:

“No. There’s nothing wrong with me. I’m sure I’m just experiencing a minor dip in body temperature.”

“...Low body temperature?”

You’ve gotta be kidding me, Kojou expressed with a scowl. Itogami Island, floating right in the middle of the Pacific, was pretty hot even in winter due to the warm ocean currents and humidity. Put more bluntly, it was hot as hell. Furthermore, the open café was getting direct sunlight from the west, enough that just sitting there was making him sweat.

If Yukina was feeling a chill in spite of that, there had to be a serious problem with her physical state.

“Kch.....!”

As a grave look came over Kojou, Yukina suddenly coughed in front of him.

“Himeragi...?”

“I’m all right. I just choked on something. There really isn’t anything wrong with me.”

When Kojou nervously rose to his feet, Yukina met his eyes, and he took note of the pained expression on her face. In contrast to her words, she didn’t look all right. Not one bit. Her breathing was ragged and it looked like it was taking all her mental fortitude just for her to keep it together.

“‘Nothing,’ my ass. You were up early this morning helping Kanase, so even you must be tired, right? Take today off and go home and rest.”

“But if we don’t confirm Aiba’s safety—”

“Standing watch here ain’t gonna do anything to help with that, and if we wait, she might contact us from her end. I left her a voicemail just in case.”

Kojou let out a sigh after his attempt to persuade Yukina. Certainly, the Gigafloat Management Corporation’s movements were suspicious, but the

situation did not yet present an immediate danger to Asagi herself. There was no reason to make Yukina force herself to wait when there was no way to know if Asagi would show or not.

However, for some reason, Yukina became sullen and argued, “No, I’m fine, really, so let’s stay here a little longer.”

“Seriously, it’s fine. Even *your* body can have an off day, y’know.”

“What do you mean by that? Is that sexual harassment?”

When Kojou tried to talk her down in an offhand way, Yukina glared at him with sharp dismay. Kojou uttered a reflexive “Wha—?” before he said, “Geez. Even when someone’s worrying about you like this, you go and...”

“At any rate... There is no problem with my body whatsoever. Now, let us try visiting Aiba’s home one more time. This time, I shall use my *shikigami* to search.”

“Well, if you’re sure, Himeragi, that would be a big help, but—”

Kojou’s shoulders fell limply as he yielded to the stubborn Yukina. He figured that a thorough search of Asagi’s home—followed by a hasty retreat—was better than fruitlessly continuing to pelt her with questions.

After Kojou finished off his iced coffee, he and Yukina left the café.

Just as they got outside, Kojou was struck by the sense he’d just stepped into an unfamiliar world.

“Huh...?”

A chill ran up his spine. His instincts asserted that danger was near.

“Senpai, pull back! There is a person-repelling barrier here!”

Yukina drew her silver spear from the guitar case she carried on her back. The metallic shaft slid and extended, and the folded blades deployed like the wings of a fighter plane.

Swiftly twirling that spear around, Yukina lowered her posture, poised for battle.

“Barrier...? Wait, when did that happen...?” he murmured in astonishment.

At some point, without their knowledge, the open café's guests and staff, plus all the Asagi fans camped out at the entrance, had vanished from sight. Kojou and Yukina were the only people left.

Someone had launched a magical attack on them in the middle of the city and in broad daylight. The aggressor's target was either Kojou or Yukina—or both.

“What the heck...?!” exclaimed Kojou as he noticed an individual quietly walking out of the now-deserted entrance gate. The figure was slender and wore a hooded white cloak that covered their entire body. The person was some thirty meters from Kojou and Yukina, but even at that distance, they felt a distinct supernatural aura surrounding their opponent.

Rather than bloodlust or hostility, it felt like the calm before the storm. At the slightest provocation, it threatened to morph into a raging hurricane that would mow down all in its path.

“Senpai, please be careful... That person is dangerous,” Yukina warned, a slight hint of fear evident in her voice.

“Y-yeah...but they're not actually doing anything—”

They're not even carrying a weapon, Kojou thought, but in the very next moment, there was a soft *ting* sound as the figure in the cloak leaped. The figure closed the distance with Kojou and Yukina, moving bizarrely, as if ignoring the laws of gravity.

“Snowdrift Wolf!”

A pale light enveloped the silver spear Yukina poised. This was the radiance of the Divine Oscillation Effect, able to rend any barrier and nullify demonic energy.

That radiance scattered odd particles as Yukina leaped forward. Defending Kojou as he stood dumbfounded, she moved to intercept the person in white.

However, the figure wavered and dissipated right before Yukina's eyes.

The feat was achieved through an optical illusion created by high-speed motion of one's center of gravity as well as a leg feint.

Yukina's attack exceeded the reaction speed of beast peoples', but the figure

in the white mantle had evaded it with ease. Yukina instantly twirled her spear around, launching multiple rapid-fire attacks, but even so, she could not land a hit on the person in white.

As if to mock Yukina's sense of urgency, the figure in white slipped past her barrage, landing right in front of Kojou as he stood still.

Kojou reflexively went on guard when he was caught by the fingertips the figure in white trained toward his chest. The fingertips unleashed an invisible blade woven from magical energy.

“—?!”

With an incoherent cry, Kojou's body was sent flying. His uniform was spectacularly torn over his chest, and fresh blood spilled from his throat. Were Kojou not an immortal vampire, he would have died right then and there.

“Akatsuki-senpai!”

The sight of Kojou wounded brought fresh rage to Yukina's eyes. She slammed the butt of her spear into the ground, utilizing the recoil to close the distance with the figure in white in one bound, using her body weight as she unleashed a blow at maximum speed.

Then, with its back still turned toward Yukina, the figure in white eluded that attack with ease.

The gap in their strength was dizzying. Yukina, a Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency, was being toyed with. The difference was too great.

The slight shake of the head beneath the white hood denoted the assailant's disappointment. Then the slender silhouette twinned itself, making Kojou feel like he was seeing double.

“The hell...? What gives...? Now there's two of 'em?!”

Kojou's jaw nearly hit the ground as the cloaked person's body copied itself before his eyes. This was no momentary afterimage, but rather, a true double. The person had magically created a clone so as to defeat Kojou and Yukina simultaneously.

The two figures in white cloaks each extended their left arms. Countless

spheres of light appeared amid their outstretched palms. The spheres gradually increased in radiance, transforming into sharply tapered arrows of light.

“Spirit archery?! That technique, it can’t be—!”

Yukina’s expression stiffened in fear.

Beneath the hoods that covered their heads, the figures’ red-dyed lips curled upward.

“—I, Maiden of the Lion, Sword Shaman of the High God, beseech thee!”

Retreating, Yukina re-brandished her spear, lowering her eyes as she quietly got her breathing under control. A solemn chant trickled out from her lips. To protect Kojou, unable to move due to his injuries, she was deploying a barrier to nullify magical energy.

No matter how powerful the magic of the white-mantled figure, it could not breach a Divine Oscillation Effect barrier. However...

“Too slow—”

Before Yukina could complete her barrier, the ground at her feet split open.

Emerging from the crevice was a moving corpse bound by a rusted chain. Flesh had rotted and fallen from its entire body, leaving intact only the sinews connecting the bones to one another. Its skull was a hollow cavity, containing neither eyes nor a brain. And yet, the skeleton raised a rusted spear, impeding Yukina’s ritual spell.

“Ku... Aa...!”

Snowdrift Wolf in hand, Yukina parried the blow from the spear wielded by the skeleton. Still, the skeletal soldier continued swinging its weapon with overwhelming brute force. The small-statured Yukina was sent flying helplessly through the air, landing hard on the asphalt road.

“Himeragi?!”

Kojou dragged his wounded body along as he forced himself to his feet.

The skeletal soldier that had assaulted Yukina was a magical familiar belonging to the cloaked figure. It was much faster than it looked, and it

possessed overwhelming strength impossible for any normal living creature to match.

However, it was neither the skeletal soldier's characteristics nor its physical strength that made Kojou gape. Rather, it was the fact that the skeletal soldier poised its rusted spear with the same movements as Yukina. Their stances were the mirror image of each other. The attacks delivered while in those stances were the same, too—the attacker's familiar was employing the techniques of a Sword Shaman.

“Shit... From this distance...”

Kojou glared, clenching his jaw as the ferocious battle between Yukina and the familiar continued. If he employed the power of a Beast Vassal—a summoned beast dwelling within his own vampiric blood—defeating the skeletal soldier would be simple.

However, Kojou could not use a Beast Vassal as long as Yukina was nearby. After all, Kojou's Beast Vassals were too powerful; he was sure that Yukina would inevitably suffer collateral damage.

“Apologies, but I am your opponent.”

One of the duplicates looked down at the injured Kojou while coldly making that statement. To Kojou's surprise, the voice sounded feminine. The tone of voice had a teasing, unconventional resonance that left Kojou perplexed. Somehow, he felt like he'd heard that voice before.

“You will behave yourself for the moment, Fourth Primogenitor. I insist.”

This spoken, the young woman in the white cloak waved her left hand.

The countless arrows of light she unleashed traced a complex arc as they flew through the air, assaulting Kojou from all directions. Even with a vampire's reaction speed, it was impossible to evade them all.

“Ugh—?!”

Both arms and limbs were simultaneously shot, sending Kojou tumbling to the ground. It didn't hurt as much as he'd expected. Just as the woman had stated beforehand, he could not move. The arrows piercing his four limbs had pinned

Kojou to the ground.

“Sen...pai...!”

All light vanished from Yukina’s eyes the instant she saw the bloodied Kojou.

Seizing the opportunity provided by her moment’s hesitation, the skeletal warrior thrust its spear. From its base, the tip of the rusty spear was sliced apart like soft candy, and the pieces fell to the ground.

Without warning, Yukina thrust her spear forward and reduced the skeletal soldier’s entire body to dust.

The white-mantled figure controlling the familiar showed signs of disquiet for the first time.

“Ah... Aaah... AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH—!”

Yukina’s voice was strained. It was neither a cry nor a shriek, but a sad, painful scream. Snowdrift Wolf unleashed a beam of light so brilliant that it hurt to look at. Arrows of light loosed by the figure in white were all engulfed by the beam, vanishing.

“Himeragi...?!” Kojou murmured in shock as he lay pinned to the ground.

The two clones launched a simultaneous attack against Yukina. These throwing-blade attacks were the same as that which had gouged a hole in Kojou’s chest with a single blow. However, in spite of the countless optical illusions that came with these attacks, Yukina evaded each and every one.

Yukina leaped and, in a flash of light, drove her silver spear straight through the second white-mantled figure.

The mantle covering the body of the assailant made a dry sound as it fell to the ground.

The clone vanished, and the remains of the skeletal soldier also disappeared like in a puff of smoke. The arrows pinning Kojou to the ground vanished as well.

Confirming this, Yukina’s body wavered, depleted of strength. The radiance emitted by Snowdrift Wolf faded as well, and Yukina, unable to bear the spear’s weight, dropped to her knees.

“Himeragi?! Himeragi, keep it together...!!”

As Yukina’s ragged breathing resumed, Kojou raced to her side.

Gazing at the sight of the pair, the assailant pulled off her white cloak as she sighed.

The unveiled face of their assailant was that of a beautiful woman.

She looked young, but Kojou couldn’t place her actual age. She had skin so pale that it was almost translucent. She had light-green hair—and eyes of the same color. The bridge of her nose made her face seem deeply chiseled. And she had pointed ears. She was a demon—an elf.

They were exceptionally rare demons, to the point that Kojou, resident of a Demon Sanctuary, was setting eyes upon one for the first time.

“Goodness. When I heard you had employed Divine Possession against Natsuki Minamiya, I thought perhaps this was the case. This power... It is indeed so, I take it, Yukina?”

The elven woman posed the question as she stroked the black cat in her arms. As Yukina borrowed Kojou’s shoulder, her entire body went rigid like that of a frightened child.

Kojou clenched his jaw, shifting an angry gaze toward the elf as he growled, “You... Why do you know about Himeragi...?!”

“Ma...ster...” As if interrupting Kojou’s question, Yukina addressed the elven woman in a trembling voice.

In response, the tall elf’s green eyes shot Yukina a frigid stare.

Kojou glanced back and forth between the pair’s faces with a thoroughly confused expression on his own. Kojou knew of only one person Yukina addressed as master: Yukari Endou of the Lion King Agency—the individual acting as Yukina’s mentor.

“Master... Huh? Meaning, wait, you’re the actual person behind Professor Kitty...?!”

This time, it was Kojou who gawked while staring at the cat in the elven woman’s arms. The cat had glossy black fur and golden eyes. Its slender collar

was adorned with chrysoberyl. He certainly remembered the cat; it was the familiar controlled by Yukari Endou.

“Surely you knew. When did you first realize it, Yukina?” Yukari inquired.

Yukina, trembling, said nothing in reply. Averting her eyes from her master, she did nothing but bite her lip.

“Now what shall we do? Though, having confirmed it with my very own eyes, it is not something I can simply overlook.”

Speaking those words, Yukari crouched down and reached for the silver spear. Yukina gasped, clutching Snowdrift Wolf against her chest, resisting Yukari’s attempt to take it away.

“You mustn’t... Master, I can still...!”

“Yukina!”

Yukari scolded Yukina with a sharp voice. However, Yukina did not let go of the spear.

“Hey, hold on! Why the hell is Professor Kitty attacking Himeragi?!”

Still unable to comprehend the situation, Kojou wedged himself between the two. He thought if he simply sat and watched, combat between master and disciple might recommence at any moment.

As he did so, Yukina gently drew her lips close to his ear. Then, she spoke sharply and rapidly, “Senpai, we need to run!”

“Huh?! Run—?”

How? Kojou meant to ask, but before he could, Yukina scattered ritual scrolls from the hem of her uniform.

“Tch.” Yukari clicked her tongue. Naturally, she hadn’t expected the overly serious Yukina to defy her at a time like that anymore than Kojou had.

“Reverberate—!”

During the momentary opening left by Yukari’s delayed response, Yukina finished activating the ritual scrolls. The metallic *shikigami* scrolls transformed into a flock of birds that swarmed Yukari. It was the sort of long-range attack

that Shamanic War Dancers of the Lion King Agency, not Sword Shamans, specialized in. Because the attack was so unexpected, Yukari needed additional time to counter.

Meanwhile, Yukina created a huge wolf *shikigami* and hopped on its back, intending to make her escape astride it. Of course, Kojou was right there with her. Tracking magic worked poorly against Yukina thanks to Snowdrift Wolf. Even with Yukari's abilities, it would be difficult to pursue them further.

And so, using the long-range attack magic that normally gave her such trouble, Yukina escaped from Yukari's grasp.

It was a method of fighting Yukina would never even have considered half a year ago.

There was no mistaking that Yukina had grown, and at a speed surpassing even Yukari's wildest expectations. She wondered if Yukina herself realized what misfortune this unexpected rate of growth would bring her—

“Yukina...you've...”

The elven Attack Mage narrowed her beautiful green eyes as she sighed.

The black cat she held in her arms looked up, offering up a soft meow to the dusky sky.



CHAPTER TWO INTO STRATUM ZERO

CHAPTER TWO

INTO STRATUM ZERO

1

A crimson tank raced through the somber city. It was no bigger than the average automobile. It was a micro-robotic tank in a shape easily reminiscent of a land turtle.

Constructed with anti-demon combat in an urban environment in mind, the robot tank had high maneuverability. It could traverse stairs and obstacles to a certain extent, even climbing sheer walls if the need arose. Its maximum burst of speed probably exceeded two hundred kilometers per hour. None would think one could chase a machine like that in a dense urban area.

However, the driver of the robot tank refused to slow down. The crimson reinforced-plastic armor plating had countless nicks and scratches carved into it. Someone was chasing the robot tank as it continued to flee.

“Warning—bogey at two o’clock. Range 1,800. Number: four.”

Inside the robotic tank cockpit, warning sounds blared without pause.

Heeding these warnings was a driver—a twelve-year-old girl—in a posture as if riding a motorcycle. She was a foreigner with fiery red hair. She wore a bodysuit, with DIDIER on the name tag sewn onto the chest.

“Pursuers, hmm? They art swift, indeed.”

Lydianne Didier clicked her tongue as she gazed at the information about her pursuers displayed on the screen.

The tank’s internal leg motors were already overheated; output had begun falling. She would have loved to increase its speed to make a clean getaway, but that would be difficult given the circumstances.

“Speed differential: minus 76.6 meters per second. Estimate seventeen seconds to contact.”

The tank’s combat support AI issues fresh warnings. Lydianne’s cheeks puffed up like those of a sulking child as she lifted the safeties for all weapons.

“Launch smoke grenades! Scatter stun mines!”

“—Smoke grenades launched. Stun mines loaded. Commencing scatter.”

The support AI repeated Lydianne’s commands as it fired the onboard weapon systems.

The smoke grenades were a special model developed by Didier Heavy Industries’ Itogami Island lab to interfere with beast-people’s senses of scent as well as tracking via magic. The stun mines were powerful enough to knock the average demon out for at least half a day. No matter how skilled the pursuers, these surely weren’t obstacles that could be overcome with ease. And yet—

In the next instant, the robot tank was assaulted by a blow from an unexpected direction.

The blow came from straight overhead. It was as if a gigantic ax had been swung down at the robot tank.

Shouldering an unexpected burden, one of the wheels lost its grip, sending the tank into a spin. The underbelly armor sprayed sparks in every direction as it scraped against asphalt.

“Hizamaru—what was that just now?!”

“Sniping via anti-materiel rifle. Damage is light. Analyzing bullet trajectory—shooter location determined.”

“Machine guns, full volley!”

“Roger. Auto-targeting. Machine guns opening fire.”

The tank’s four onboard antipersonnel machine-gun ports belched flame. She didn’t think she could take out a sniper on top of a building by firing from the ground. It could at least disrupt the enemy’s sniping, though.

At the same time, the robot tank regained its balance and attempted to flee

once again.

But a moment before that could happen, one of the pursuers emerged, charging out of the fog and leaping toward the rear of the robot tank.

“A head-on attack?! He doth intend to climb aboard?!”

“Machine guns have zero rounds remaining. Cannot maintain barrage.”

“Turn! Rid us of him!”

Lydianne made the robot tank spin powerfully, but the pursuer calmly remained latched onto it as he raised the sidearm he wielded.

“Could it be possible...? Be they no mere humans? The Island Guard’s SSG, perhaps?!”

Lydianne felt she had zeroed in on the true nature of her foe. The Sorcerous Suppression Group was rumored to be the mightiest of the Island Guard, a special unit under the direct command of the Board of Directors. However, the Gigafloat Management Corporation did not publicly acknowledge its existence. This was because the equipment of the Attack Mages assigned to the SSG was constructed with feedback from research on demons conducted on Itogami Island. Using the results of biological research on demons for military applications was a Demon Sanctuary’s greatest taboo.

Wearing a pitch-black combat suit, the pursuer trained the barrel of his gun on the robot’s front legs. The six-barreled machine gun ferociously pumped bullets into them from point-blank range.

“Hizamaru!” cried Lydianne at the top of her lungs.

In the middle of turning, the tank lost its balance and crashed into a side wall on the edge of the street.

“Sustained small-caliber Gatling gunfire at point-blank range. Front left leg heavily damaged. Fourth joint connection detached.”

“Fire wire anchors! Use the monorail pontoon and abscond to the sea!” Lydianne instructed to her support AI.

The armor of the tank she had dubbed Hizamaru was composed of special, ritually reinforced plastic. This armor, extremely impact resistant, could

withstand direct hits from 20 mm cannon rounds and even anti-tank rockets, but it was surprisingly fragile against sustained attacks concentrated on a single point. The next time Hizamaru sustained a similar attack, it would surely be destroyed in its entirety.

“Cannot employ wire anchors. Launch equipment has been destroyed. Rear legs and main generator unit heavily damaged. Switching life support to emergency generator.”

The support AI sent up one damage report after another. Lydianne gawked at the several warning lights flashing around the cockpit.

“Is this the end...?”

Smiling ruefully, the red-haired girl extended a hand toward the self-destruct system.

Lydianne was an elite child raised at Europe’s Didier Heavy Industries, a famous weapons-manufacturing enterprise. She had been dispatched to that Demon Sanctuary as a developer and test driver for that robot tank. Though dying on the field of battle was less than ideal, she had no regrets. Lydianne stubbornly refused to cease speaking in a traditionally formal manner, as if she were a samurai, because she revered the purity of their mindset—and their lack of fear of death.

The one thing that ate at her mind was that she had not saved her friend. Lydianne had been pursued because she had failed to rescue that captive friend.

The SSG Attack Mages were approaching, weapons in hand. Lydianne waited for them to get close enough before activating the self-destruct system.

In the next moment, a flash of light dyed the robot tank’s main monitor white.

“...?!”

The color of the Attack Mages’ faces changed.

Without the least bit of forewarning, the area became flooded with demonic energy so potent, it threatened to burn their skin to ash.

The energy coalesced into a gigantic blade that mercilessly swept across the

ground.

Caught in the sudden blow, the Attack Mages surrounding Lydianne were sent flying. The surrounding buildings collapsed and there was a gaping fissure in the road. Truly, it looked like a natural disaster had swept through. Lydianne had no doubt that any normal human would have died instantly.

“Oh. So they survived, did they?”

As the Attack Mages recovered from the shock wave, they heard a somewhat admiring voice from behind them.

The speaker was a small-statured boy. He had beautiful black hair and olive skin. His eyes were the color of gold.

He exuded an enigmatic sort of dignity that fit poorly with his youthful face. His disposition seemed to be that of a ferocious lion cub. Seemingly awestruck, the Attack Mages went on the defensive.



“Those combat suits, they have beast-man cells implanted into them, yes? If memory serves, the use of demonic biological tissue for military purposes is a violation of the Holy Grounds Treaty, is it not?”

The youth walked unceremoniously forward as he spoke in an icy tone.

“Why wouldst he...?”

Inside the damaged robot tank, Lydianne was at a loss for words.

Lydianne knew the youth’s name. Iblisveil Aziz—a second-generation vampire from the bloodline of Fallgazer, the Second Primogenitor, and a crown prince of the Fallen Dynasty.

But before Lydianne could wonder *Why wouldst he appear here of all places?* the Attack Mages went on the move.

“Vampire... An Old Guard. Be wary of Beast Vassals.”

A man appearing to be the squad leader gave orders to his comrades. Even with wounds over their entire bodies, the Attack Mages’ movements did not waver in the slightest. All at once, they surrounded Iblisveil and trained their gun barrels on him.

“I have a connection to the little girl in that tank. Though it would appear you have been quite rude to her, if you depart immediately, I shall allow you to leave, you common whelps.”

Iblisveil laughed cheerily, choosing to completely ignore the tension levels rising all around him.

Out of fear, the SSG squad leader shouted, “Second squad, permission to snipe at will. Fire—!”

“Fools...”

As soon as the bullets left the Attack Mages’ barrels, they lost all velocity, as if they were intercepted by an invisible wall. The demonic energy perpetually surrounding Iblisveil had become physical pressure, forcing the bullets back.

“Wha...?!”

The squad leader’s voice trembled with horror, conveying his hesitation to the

other members of the squad. It was precisely because they were such skilled Attack Mages that they realized the true terror of the youthful opponent they had provoked.

“Mince them, Qebhsenuel—”

Iblisveil unleashed a cloud of demonic energy that materialized in the form of a bird of prey. It was a golden peregrine falcon with a wingspan of fourteen or fifteen meters. The wind kicked up by its enormous wings became a vortex of countless blades.

“Damn you... Don’t tell me you’re Fallgazer’s direct descendant...”

The squad leader stared at Iblisveil in sheer terror. His words never reached him, for the tornado kicked up by the golden Beast Vassal engulfed the SSG Attack Mages without sparing a single one. Even with the power to limit damage to the surrounding area, its might was still overwhelming. The shock wave and blades created from vast demonic energy shredded their combat suits and neutralized their weapons.

Finally, the blast winds vanished, leaving Iblisveil the only one standing there unscathed.

The prince of a foreign land was wearing an extravagant white outfit embroidered with gold. In contrast, his right and left hands were holding a convenience store shopping bag and a steaming cup of ramen respectively.

“Goodness. You insignificant flecks of garbage made my ramen go cold.”

Iblisveil made a small, ill-humored snort as he stared down at the contents of his ramen cup. He’d been on his way back to his hotel, carrying the cup of ramen he had bought at a nearby convenience store.

Then, as he turned his eyes toward the half-wrecked robot tank, he sighed, only murmuring “Goodness.”

2

Nagisa Akatsuki was very busy after school. She had her class representative meeting, her club activities, her homework, cleaning, laundry, and also dinner

to prepare. Her mother, only returning home on a whim every one-to-two weeks, always arrived with a large bundle of laundry in tow. Also, she needed to visit her father in the hospital once in a while. If her older brother Kojou was there, she'd have shamelessly put him to work as well, but he'd said he would be returning late that day.

So by the time Nagisa had finished her own portion of the daily chores, it had somehow reached past six PM. She stole a few bites from dinner as she awaited Kojou's return.

It was not long before she heard the doorbell ring.

"Yes, yes. Just a moment, please."

Nagisa, still dressed down in a T-shirt and shorts, headed to the entrance.

Then, when she opened the door, her eyes bulged. Standing there was a girl wearing the uniform of a school she was not familiar with. She was tall and slender—and stylish enough that one might suspect she was a performer. Her long hair, worn in a ponytail, was a light chestnut-brown. Her beauty evoked the image of a cherry blossom in bloom.

"Er, um... Eh? Ah, you're Yukina's upperclass—"

Nagisa looked at the girl, her wariness plain. She'd encountered this a number of times before. Her name was Sayaka Kirasaka. Apparently, she was Yukina Himeragi's upperclassmate from the school she attended before coming to Itogami Island.

Nagisa was unable to trust her whatsoever at the moment, because her first impression had been so awful. Nagisa had witnessed Asagi get caught in the crossfire of an altercation between Sayaka and Kojou. That, combined with a lack of information, left Nagisa with the notion that although Sayaka was unusually beautiful, she was a dangerous woman who might start swinging sharp objects at any moment.

However, that day, Sayaka seemed noticeably different. She appeared fragile, as if she might break into tears without warning, and she looked at Nagisa with eyes that seemed ready to overflow with them. *It's like she worried herself sick and came here holding onto her last straw for dear life*, thought Nagisa.

“Hello. Um... Is...Kojou Akatsuki here?”

Sayaka inquired in an awkward voice.

For some reason, Nagisa felt apologetic as she explained, “He hasn’t come home yet. He said he was visiting Yaze—a friend of his, at the hospital today.”

“Is that so...? Then I suppose Yukina’s with him.”

“Yes. I believe so...”

Nagisa nodded without hesitation. Kojou and Yukina doing things together was nothing out of the ordinary. At first, she thought it was strange since they weren’t a couple or anything. But lately, it had become so commonplace that she’d stopped questioning it altogether.

“Um... You’re Yukina’s classmate, aren’t you?”

“Eh? Ah yes.”

Nagisa, fairly overwhelmed by the force of Sayaka’s approach, nodded. Sayaka seemed to be brooding over something as she gave Nagisa a serious look and asked, “How has Yukina been lately? Has anything about her...*changed*?”

“Eh? What do you mean, ‘changed’?”

“Like...does she seem sluggish? Do her eyes seem watery? Has she had a fever...?”

“Are you asking...if she has a cold, or something?” Nagisa prompted, perplexed, not understanding the point of Sayaka’s question.

She thought Yukina’s condition seemed no different than usual. Since she’d spent the morning delivering food as volunteer work, Nagisa was the one who was sleepier than usual. But if she really thought about a difference in Yukina’s behavior—

“Now that you mention it, Yukina didn’t seem to have much of an appetite. Last night, she didn’t eat very much, and today at noon she said she was a little nauseated, so all she had was some lemon squash juice.” Nagisa followed up in a joking tone, “She’s already so thin. What’ll happen to her if she goes on a diet?”

However, upon listening to this, Sayaka's reaction was dramatic.

"I knew it..."

Face pale, Sayaka wobbled, and something fell from her hand to her feet. Covering her shapely eyes with both hands, she fell to her knees in apparent anguish.

"Kojou Akatsuki, you idiot... What have you done to my precious Yukina...?!"

"Huh? What about Kojou...?"

Sayaka's reaction unnerved Nagisa. Something must have happened between the two of that was bad enough to seriously upset Sayaka.

"Wait, please. What has my dear brother done to Yukina? Or rather, let's not stand and talk here. Please come inside. Dinner's just about ready, so we can eat while we wait for Kojou and Yukina to come home—"

Nagisa tried to drag Sayaka—who was now having a panic attack in the fetal position—into the apartment. In the first place, having a conspicuous girl like Sayaka sitting in the entryway was an abnormal situation. If the neighbors saw something like that, who knew what rumors might spread?

However, Sayaka raised her head with a hollow gaze and said, "Thank you, but I have to find Yukina quickly... Right now, her body is in an abnormal state..."

"U-ummm...!"

Sayaka wobbled to her feet, walking off with an unsteady gait. With anxiety rising in her chest, Nagisa watched Sayaka depart.

When Sayaka eventually completely vanished from view, Nagisa noticed the case that had fallen to her feet.

"What's this? A...testing kit? Ummm... That means this is some kind of testing fluid, right?"

Spurred on by a vague sense of unease, Nagisa plucked the case off the ground.

Sayaka had probably dropped it. Inside the plastic case, as large as a thumb,

was fluid along with a small paper strip. Having experienced a prolonged hospital life, just looking at it gave Nagisa a pretty good idea of how it was used. The testing fluid inside the kit reacted to a single drop of blood or saliva to detect some kind of change in the body—that sort of thing.

For instance, viral infection, allergies, or perhaps, whether a woman was pregnant—

“This test reads...positive..... Huh?”

This time, it was Nagisa who gawked as she saw the explanation written on the case.

3

It was a canal under a raised highway bridge—there, Kojou Akatsuki watched the rain.

The weather had changed right after Kojou and Yukina had fled from Yukari Endou.

On Itogami Island, floating atop the Pacific Ocean, sudden showers in the evening were not a rare occurrence. However, the rain that day seemed to drag on for quite a while. The evening mist clouding the artificial isle skyline made for poor visibility. It went without saying that this was convenient for a couple of fugitives like them, but that thought gave way to gloom.

“Senpai, are your wounds okay?” Yukina asked him meekly as she looked at him sitting limply.

Kojou’s uniform was covered in blood. His four limbs each had grisly puncture wounds from the arrows bored into them, and his chest had been slashed horizontally; all wounds inflicted by Yukari Endou. He hadn’t been beaten so severely, nor so easily, since Paper Noise had wiped the floor with him on New Year’s.

It was strength on par with—or greater than—the Three Saints of the Lion King Agency. If he deeply understood one thing about Yukari’s seemingly limitless might, it was that. No wonder Yukina was afraid of her. But—

“They’re pretty much healed already. Thanks for buying a change of clothes for me.”

Kojou made a show of putting strength into both his clenched hands. The wounds Yukari had inflicted on his entire body throbbed only with minor pain. One would expect nothing less from a vampire primogenitor’s completely broken regenerative ability.

“It was nothing. After all, it was my master’s fault for being so reckless in the first place.”

Yukina shook her head with a hardened expression. She probably felt responsible for involving Kojou.

“I suppose,” came his noncommittal reply as he locked his hands behind his head, laughing casually. “But all things considered, I didn’t expect the real Professor Kitty to be so pretty. Plus, she was wearing that cloak thingy that looked super-stuffy. What was she trying to do, give the cat heatstroke?”

“Really? *That* was your main concern?”

Yukina’s expression finally softened a little bit. As she did, Kojou looked up at her.

“Come to think of it, why’d she attack you in the first place, Himeragi? If she was just ‘testing her disciple’ or whatever, don’t you think that was a bit much?”

“I believe Master meant to...drive me into a corner.”

Yukina’s reply came with a fragile smile. The look on her face perplexed him.

“Enough to make you get serious? Did she have a reason to go that far?”

“Yes. Probably.”

Yukina bit her lip and lowered her eyes. Remaining silent afterward was probably an indication she didn’t want to speak about it further. Apparently, she had some kind of circumstance she couldn’t tell Kojou about.

“Well, fine. More importantly, Himeragi, aren’t you cold? If this rain keeps up, we could buy an umbrella at a convenience store on the way back, or—”

He started to get up as he spoke, but then a light, barely audible impact connected with his back. Through his uniform, he felt faint warmth and soft elasticity.

Yukina had crept close and embraced Kojou's defenseless back with her entire body. There was no way for Kojou to hide his surprise.

"H-Himeragi...?!"

"Senpai... I don't want to go home tonight."

"Huh?! Huhhh...?!"

Unable to believe his ears, Yukina's words made Kojou's thought process screech to a halt.

"Nah, this isn't right. There are a lot of things not right with that phrasing! More to the point, um, you live alone, Himeragi, so what do you mean you don't want to go home—?"

"That room was provided by the Lion King Agency. I have no doubt it is being occupied by a pursuer from the Lion King Agency this very moment."

"Eh? Ah, so that's what you meant by not wanting to go home..."

Now that he understood her intent, Kojou recovered from his shock. He knew this was probably stating the obvious, but she really was anxious. Attacked by her master, Yukari Endou, and pursued by the Lion King Agency—which had practically raised her as family—there was no way she could be calm about the situation.

"Um, but why is the Lion King Agency after you, Himeragi? I could understand them being after me, but it's not like you did anything wrong. That fight earlier was legit self-defense."

"No. I understand why the Lion King Agency perceives me to be dangerous."

Removing her hands from Kojou's back, Yukina hung her head. Turning around to face her, he knit his brows without another word. Over the last few days, Kojou had somehow picked up on the fact that something was off with her, but he didn't think that was an issue necessitating the Lion King Agency's pursuit.

The reason they were after Yukina was probably hidden in the brief conversation between her and Yukari Endou. However, no matter how much Kojou thought about it, he couldn't imagine what that reason might be.

As if showing consideration for the perplexed Kojou, Yukina smiled charmingly and shook her head. "I am sorry to have spoken so selfishly. Senpai, please return home ahead of me. I'm sure Nagisa must be worried about you."

"Ahead of— What are you gonna do, Himeragi?"

Kojou asked this because the expression on Yukina's face gave him a bad feeling. She looked as if a great weight had just been taken off her shoulders.

"I won't be returning to that room. But worry not. I shall properly observe you, senpai. I shall watch you until the very end."

"Nah, I can't relax after hearing that. I'm even more freaked out now, actually."

Rubbing the goose bumps breaking out on his upper arms, Kojou let out a deep sigh. Any way he sliced it, leaving Yukina alone in her current state, like she had her back to the wall, was too dangerous to consider.

Besides, he wanted to avoid a situation similar to how Nagisa became involved in a Lion King Agency attack because Kojou and Yukina had gone home and left her alone. Perhaps, at the very least, it was best to remain away from home as much as possible until the circumstances had been cleared up.

"Well, fine. There's no school tomorrow, anyway. How about we change clothes somewhere and go do some karaoke?"

"Karaoke...?"

Yukina blinked wide-eyed at Kojou's sudden proposal. There was no particular reason to do karaoke, but there weren't many other places where a middle schooler could spend a long period of time after classes without arousing suspicion. Of those, a karaoke club was the first one that came to Kojou's mind.

"Come to think of it, I haven't done karaoke with you before, huh, Himeragi? Actually, Himeragi, do you even know what karaoke is?"

Once Yukina accepted that Kojou was being completely serious, she pursed

her lips and glared at him.

“Um...by any chance, are you making fun of me? Even I can sing.”

“Huh? You can?”

The evident surprise in Kojou’s reply only served to deepen Yukina’s frown.

That said, it was pretty hard to imagine Yukina and other girls going through intensive training at High God Forest performing karaoke. Just what kinds of songs did people who walked around with spears and swords stuffed into instrument cases all the time sing anyway?

“I’m not as familiar with the more popular songs... Oh, but I do remember the song Asagi sang.”

When Yukina made the assertion with a hint of pride, she gasped and realized her verbal slip. The song “Asagi” sang—the popularity of which was spreading through the city like wildfire—was a fraud created by the Gigafloat Management Corporation. Kojou and Yukina were attempting to meet with her in order to prove that very thing.

“I... I’m sorry... It was not my intention to...”

Yukina backpedaled, trying to be considerate.

“No need to apologize. The song didn’t do anything wrong.”

Kojou gave her forehead a light flick.

“Ow,” she muttered, putting a hand on her forehead, but somehow, she looked relieved as well.

“Well, if we’re gonna hit up karaoke, how ’bout we grab some ramen or something, first? It’s no surprise that I’m hungry after all that, what with the blood loss and all.”

“Ramen, you say? I see. If it’s noodles, I might be able to eat, too...”

“I’m pretty sure there’s a shop with tasty ramen nearby. Asagi told me about it...”

What was that place called, again? pondered Kojou as he searched his memories. Asagi, a glutton despite her looks, religiously frequented the pop

restaurants in Itogami City. Kojou had met up with Asagi a number of times at one place among those she was particularly fond of. One of those instances was fairly recent.

Fortuitously, the rain was easing up right around that moment.

As he and Yukina headed in the direction of the commercial district, Kojou remembered the name.

“Menya Itogami—that was it.”

4

The shop’s interior was enveloped by a strange atmosphere.

The establishment called Menya Itogami was located in Island West on the first floor of a multi-tenant building near the train station. There were nine seats at the counter and four chairs to a table. The storefront gave off the image of perfectly average ramen establishment. The shop was relatively full, with a line going out the door.

A party of two was sitting at the table farthest in back, facing each other.

This pair was the cause of the bizarre atmosphere possessing the shop.

Both were clearly foreigners. Neither the boy nor the girl looked any older than their early teens.

The boy was dressed in a luxurious white tunic, with unmitigated dignity and nobility effortlessly oozing from his every word and gesture. His overflowing charisma suffused the air of what was very much a commoner’s ramen shop, turning the comfortable interior space oddly uncomfortable.

And sitting in front of the boy was a small-statured girl with fiery red hair.

She was wearing an outfit that resembled a school swimsuit fitting very snugly against her petite frame. Guests inside the shop stared at her, a borderline criminal air hovering around them.

Suddenly, that very girl rose to her feet with excitement, calling out to Kojou as he stood before the ticket machine.

“Sir Boyfriend! Sir Boyfriend, is it not?! You are Lady Empress’s Sir Boyfriend, yes?!”

“Huh? What the hell?”

Kojou, taking his ticket, raised his head, shuddering as everyone’s gazes suddenly converged upon him.

The guests looked between Kojou and the girl as they started to murmur.

The extraordinary reaction of those people made Kojou and Yukina exchange troubled looks. They hadn’t the faintest idea what was going on. Though Kojou felt like getting the hell out of there, he’d already bought their meal ticket, so he couldn’t bring himself to leave and waste it.

Then, the girl stood before Kojou and excitedly pointed to the name box over her chest.

“It is I, Lydianne Didier! Dost thou not remember me?”

“Oh...! You’re that friend of Asagi’s...!” Kojou shouted as the realization struck him.

She was the robot-tank driver that Asagi called Tanker. The reason it had taken Kojou so long to remember was that he had never actually seen her outside of the tank.

The murmuring inside the shop grew in intensity the moment Kojou and the others uttered the word *Empress*, the buzzword for Asagi. At that point, there was hardly a single person on Itogami Island who did not know the name of Asagi Aiba, the Cyber Empress. Of course, all eyes were going to gather on a group including a “friend” and a “boyfriend” of hers.

A cold sweat broke out on Kojou’s back as the urge to run out the door clawed at him a second time.

Perhaps knowing nothing of Kojou’s sentiments, Lydianne dramatically pulled up the abdominal slit of her pilot suit as she said, “I hath failed, Sir Boyfriend. Because my power is insufficient, Lady Empress remaineth away from us... I shall atone for my sins accordingly and cut my stomach—”

“Wait, WAIT! What the hell are you doing, exposing yourself in a place like

this?!”

When Lydianne tried to wield her chopsticks as if to plunge them into her stomach, Kojou grabbed her arms and held them behind her.

By this point, the gazes gathered upon him were no longer at a warm and fuzzy level; now the guests inside the shop glared with open hatred. They looked as if they were watching a criminal act. Kojou supposed that if he saw a high school student holding a swimsuit-wearing little girl’s arms behind her back in a ramen shop, he’d give the guy a similar look.

Someone who looked like the proprietor of Menya Itogami was approaching their group. *We’re gonna be thrown out for sure*, thought Kojou in sincere resignation when—

“You two are making quite a fuss. Don’t you find it rude to the proprietor?”

Silence fell over the shop, seemingly summoned by the echo of that voice. The murmuring guests swallowed their breath, and the proprietor halted just as he was about to open his mouth. The speaker was the robed boy. His eyes, shining gold, beheld Kojou.

“Y-yeah. I guess so, sorry.”

The one making a fuss is the chick with you, Kojou wanted to say, but he resisted the urge and bowed his head. The brief exchange completely changed the atmosphere inside the shop.

At present, the boy in the luxurious clothing had complete command over that place. An atmosphere had been created that even the shop’s staff could not hope to dispel. The people had subconsciously yielded to his majesty, seemingly that of a born-and-bred noble. His commanding presence was such that even Kojou had to gawk.

Pulled in by Lydianne, Kojou and Yukina ended up sitting at the same table as the boy.

This meant they were being seated out of turn, but of course none of the guests voiced any complaint. *Touch not the gods, suffer no curse*—apparently. The people were tacitly acknowledging Kojou’s experience along those lines.

The ramen the boy had ordered was brought over immediately afterward.

Splitting the chopsticks with a practiced hand, the boy first took a sip of the soup. Then, he gently brought the noodles into his mouth. He seemed to be something of a master at eating the dish.

“I see. In this land, the seafood is rather fresh, and the soup employs pork bones and vegetables. The sauce uses soy and sake...and chicken skin and red peppers? Hearty ramen made in-house. They also seem rather picky about the ingredients. Hmm, small wonder Asagi recommended this place.”

“Y-yeah... Um, who are you anyway? One of Asagi’s gourmet buddies?”

Kojou, a little creeped out by the rather detailed critique, stared at the boy as he posed the question. It was deep analytical ability that would put even most ramen critics to shame. He inferred from the earlier statements that the boy was an acquaintance of Asagi’s, but aside from their bizarre obsession with the beauty of food, he couldn’t think of anything connecting her and the foreign boy whatsoever. Kojou was mentally patting himself on the back for his deduction that the two were gourmet buddies, but...

“Senpai, please be careful with your words. This person might well be—”

Having maintained her silence up to that point, Yukina whispered as if scolding Kojou. Kojou stared at her with a questioning look and asked, “You know this guy, Himeragi?”

“No,” said Yukina, shaking her head. “However, his power...is equal to or greater than the Duke of Ardeal’s...and yet, it seems different somehow...”

“Oh my.”

The boy’s chopsticks stopped, and he looked at Yukina with apparent interest. For one brief moment, something like a glint of bloodlust flickered in his eyes. It was then that Kojou finally realized what the boy was.

He was a demon. A vampire. And for that matter, an Old Guard with enormous, off-the-charts power—

“I had meant to conceal my aura, but alas. I would expect nothing less from a Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency. She has good eyes.”

“So you truly are—”

“Know your place, Sword Shaman. I am speaking to the Fourth Primogenitor as Prince of the Fallen Dynasty. It is no place for a mere observer to intervene.”

The prince’s cold words were offset by the blissful expression he wore as he enjoyed his ramen.

His blunt murmur made Kojou’s expression freeze over. Naturally, even someone as ill versed about demonic affairs as Kojou knew of the Fallen Dynasty. A prince of the Second Primogenitor, Fallgazer, who governed a malevolent Dominion in the Middle East, meant he was son to the Second Primogenitor himself.

“Your Excellency... Iblisveil...Aziz...,” Yukina murmured.

The tone of dread in her voice wasn’t Kojou’s imagination. After all, there was only a tiny table between the prince directly descended from the Second Primogenitor and the Fourth. If their demonic energies were to clash, the whole of Itogami Island would likely be wiped off the map. At that moment, the shop had become the most dangerous place on the planet. Being surrounded by an army ammunition stockpile—on fire—might well have been safer.

However, even under those conditions, Iblisveil calmly continued to eat.

“Proprietor, seconds. With extra boiled scallions, and a pickled egg, if you please.”

The prince of a foreign land brought out a jingling pouch as he conveyed his order. The proprietor awkwardly nodded and promptly began to cook.

Gazing at that exchange with half-lidded eyes, Kojou asked, “Is this really a prince? Isn’t he acting a little too...folksy for that?”

“H-he definitely is. But this sense of dignity is most certainly that of the royal class...,” Yukina answered, though she sounded unsure.

“More like, what’s the prince of the Second Primogenitor doing eating in a ramen shop with Asagi’s friend anyway?”

“Though I am reluctant in the matter, I happened to cross paths with this girl as she was about to be killed. I have taken her under my protection as a result.

Well, on a whim,” Iblisveil replied while sipping the last of the soup from his bowl.

“About to be killed?”

The prince’s inauspicious words brought a grave look from Kojou.

“Indeed,” said Lydianne in a shaky voice. Large tears were streaming down her cheeks. “’Twas the Gigafloat Management Corporation. As they dost have Lady Empress confined within Keystone Gate, I attempted to penetrate their defenses and contact her, but alas...”

Lydianne gripped both hands together, as if desperately holding her regret in check.

Kojou gently placed his own palms over her tiny fists. Lydianne lifted up her face in visible surprise. With a look of rare seriousness, Kojou gazed into the little girl’s eyes and made his request:

“Tell me everything.”

5

Forty minutes later...

Kojou and the others were standing in the entryway to an underground passage quite close to the center of Itogami Island. The passage headed downward to become a long tunnel. It was a drainage route to expel rain coursing under the artificial isle’s surface out to the sea.

However, this was merely its intended function. In truth, the underground tunnel had another purpose.

This was the supply intake route for the secret area placed in Keystone Gate—Stratum Zero. That was the original use of the rusted tunnel.

“Keystone Gate’s Stratum Zero? And that’s where Asagi’s locked up?”

Kojou peered into the eerie, unlit tunnel as he double-checked with Lydianne.

“Indeed it is. I shalt issue directions until thou arriveth at Stratum Zero.”

The girl's voice was coursing from the speaker of Kojou's smartphone. Lydianne herself was piloting the nearly wrecked crimson micro-robot tank. Hizamaru had been woefully stripped of combat potential, having lost one of its front legs and most of its weapons, but its onboard military computer and network capabilities were still intact. And Lydianne herself was apparently a genius hacker rivaling even Asagi. Having a girl like that support Kojou and Yukina's infiltration was pretty reassuring.

"That's a big help...but we're takin' on the people who busted up your tank that much, huh...?"

Kojou cast a mournful glance at Lydianne's beat-up tank, an expression coming over him as if he could say no more. Even if it was compact, Hizamaru was a proper tank for anti-demon warfare—and a cutting-edge, experimental model at that. This meant whoever trashed it had more combat potential than a hyper-advanced tank. These were the kinds of people protecting Stratum Zero of Keystone Gate.

"Are you gonna be okay after helping us like this? If you get attacked by the Island Guard—"

Kojou looked up at the half-wrecked robot tank with visible concern. Currently, Hizamaru had no strength left to fight. Furthermore, without Hizamaru, Lydianne was just an elementary schooler. Pitted against the Island Guard, she probably wouldn't even be able to flee.

Can we really ask her to help if it'll expose her to that much danger...? Such were Kojou's gloomy thoughts when Iblisveil, gazing at him in mild exasperation, made a cold declaration:

"Do not fret, Kojou Akatsuki. I shall look after the girl until this situation is death with."

"Huh...?"

The unexpected offer from the prince of a foreign land left Kojou wide-eyed. It was a shock for the overbearing, arrogant vampire to say something out of apparent consideration for Kojou.

"You're seriously okay with that?"

“Hmph. It would not be unwise for me to place you in my debt. In addition, my retainers should be arriving on Itogami Island any time now. Besides, I too hold some interest in the Gigafloat Management Corporation’s scheme.”

“That so...?”

The self-centeredness of Iblisveil’s statements actually put Kojou more at ease.

“Well, thanks for that, but don’t go overboard, please?”

“You’re one to talk... But so be it. I shall take those words to heart.”

“Please and thank you.”

Entrusting the foreign prince with Tanker, Kojou walked toward the dark underground passage. Following apace was Yukina.

She was acting like accompanying him was the most natural thing in the world. Partially annoyed, Kojou looked up at her face and said, “Himeragi, you wait here, too. You’re not at 100 percent, right? I mean, your body—”

“There is nothing wrong with my body,” she retorted, glaring. The sheer force of it overwhelmed Kojou for a moment.

“Um, but—”

“If I say I’m fine, then I’m fine! I’m your watcher, senpai, so of course I’ll accompany you. Or is it a problem for me to be with you when you meet Aiba?”

“How’d you get that idea?!” exclaimed Kojou. “I’m just worried about you—”

“Worried?” said Yukina, her temple twitching visibly. “In other words, you’re worried that I’ll slow you down?”

“Uh... No, I mean, that’s not what I meant...”

“Understood. That’s fine, then.”

Lips twisted in a visible pout, Yukina averted her eyes from Kojou.

So she does get it, thought Kojou, patting his chest in relief as he walked out into the underground passage once more.

But right behind Kojou, he could hear the sound of light footsteps following

him.

“—Wait, you’re still following, aren’t you?!”

“It is not that I am following behind you, senpai. You simply happen to be walking ahead of me. That is all.”

“Are we back in elementary school?!”

As Yukina made a stare that was sullen even for her, Kojou sighed in resignation. It was probably futile to argue with her any further. Whatever Kojou might say, Yukina would continue to follow.

“I get it. It’s fine... Please continue accompanying me, Miss Himeragi.”

“You should have said that from the beginning.”

When she saw Kojou robotically bow his head, Yukina dipped her chin in apparent satisfaction. Laughing weakly at his own expense, Kojou shook his head and said, “Yeah, yeah. So, shall we?”

“Yes.”

The guitar case on Yukina’s back swayed as she walked with a spring in her step.

As they traveled farther along the passageway and down a set of stairs, they found that it extended into a large, long, underground tunnel. Its diameter was four to five meters. A rail track for supplies was lying on the floor, and the walls and ceilings were covered in electrical and fiber-optic cables that looked like arteries. The sight made Kojou think less of a water runoff than the innards of a living creature.

“Hey, Himeragi...whaddaya think about what Lydianne was saying earlier?”

As he spoke those words, Kojou offered a hand to Yukina. Thanks to the cover story of being a water runoff, the interior of the tunnel was completely unlit. Yukina, possessing Spirit Sight, could see pretty well in the dark by human standards, but still not as well as the vampiric Kojou. Perhaps Yukina herself was tentatively aware of that, for she made no complaint as she readily accepted his hand. Kojou felt like Yukina’s cheeks had faintly reddened, but of course even a vampire’s sight could not confirm such a thing within the darkness.

“You mean, about Itogami Island being an altar for the advent of Cain, the Sinful God?” Yukina replied in a sober, serious tone.

Lydianne had stated that the existence of Cain, the Sinful God, was why Asagi had been incarcerated in Stratum Zero. Also, that Itogami Island was designed as a giant sorcerous device for the ritual to revive Cain, and that Asagi was the irreplaceable priestess medium for that ritual...

“It is not very believable, and yet, it does allow several pieces to fall into place...”

“Yeah...and wasn’t there a guy who called Asagi the Priestess of Cain?”

“Yes, Meiga Itogami, the fugitive from the Prison Barrier...”

Subconsciously, Yukina tightened her grip on Kojou’s hand.

Meiga Itogami was a sorcerous, calculating criminal who had been incarcerated in the otherworldly Prison Barrier through Natsuki Minamiya’s power. Yukina had apparently encountered the man when Kojou was fighting the Third Primogenitor, Giada Kukulkin. Apparently, she’d somehow driven him off, but he’d heard it was a pretty gritty, hard-fought affair.

“I don’t know much about him. Who is he?”

Kojou asked Yukina, who seemed doubtful.

She shook her head slightly and said:

“I don’t know. It is just that he carries a black spear that greatly resembles my Snowdrift Wolf. He said the spear is a discontinued weapon of the Lion King Agency that annihilates demonic and ritual energy alike.”

“A black spear that annihilates demonic and ritual energy? Hold on. Don’t tell me that weapon is—”

Kojou’s feet came to an immediate stop. A weapon that struck and erased all supernatural abilities—Kojou was well aware of a group who used similar sorcerous objects. They, calling themselves the Cleansers, hadn’t desired the revival of Cain, the Sinful God, but—

“Sir Boyfriend!”

In his shaken state, Kojou noticed Lydianne's voice coming from his chest. A map of the underground tunnel was displayed on the smartphone screen. Red dots were popping up all over the map.

"What's wrong, Lydianne? What are these dots?"

"Warnings. Activation of defensive machines confirmed."

"Defensive machines...?! The hell? Weren't you gonna deal with surveillance cameras and alarms?"

"The underground tunnel likely has a completely autonomous defense system. Alas, even I cannot touch it—"

"So that's what it is...!"

Kojou subconsciously clenched his teeth. If he couldn't count on Lydianne's hacking, that left only the option of breaking through by force.

Some things were using the rail laid down in the underground tunnel to seemingly glide closer to Kojou and Yukina. They looked like metal cylinders, like wastebaskets with the backs turned toward them.

They were smaller than Kojou had first thought. The diameter of one was eighteen centimeters at the most. They probably stood at a hundred and twenty centimeters or so. The way their eyelike lenses darted to and fro seemed comical, even adorable.

However, the bellies of the wastebaskets had equipment attached that was not adorable in the slightest. Each was outfitted with an antipersonnel machine gun.

And without bothering to confirm Kojou's or Yukina's identities, the horde of wastebaskets opened fire.

"Senpai!"

Yukina yanked Kojou by his shirt. "Agh!" Kojou exclaimed, arching back as a bullet grazed the tip of his nose. Kojou's and Yukina's bodies were practically entangled as they hid in the shadow of a pillar. Sparks scattered off the concrete as bullets peppered the other side without end.

"They just started shooting outta nowhere?! They're not defense machines,

they're killbots!"

Kojou shouted his complaints into the smartphone he clenched in his hand. He knew it wasn't Lydianne's fault, but it was the only way he could maintain his sanity.

"These art MAR-manufactured security pods, armed with anti-demon small-caliber machine guns and tear gas, for military use by rights. Sir Boyfriend, I wish you good fortune in battle."

"Good fortune in battle, my ass!" he shouted fervently at the irresponsible statement.

Of course, if Kojou summoned a Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor, any number of security pods would no longer be a threat. Even if several hundred of them attacked him at once, he would be able to wipe the floor with them in an instant.

However, if he summoned a Beast Vassal in such cramped quarters, he'd destroy the underground tunnel for sure. If he really messed up, Kojou and Yukina would be buried alive. And in the absolute worst-case scenario, there was a danger of wiping Keystone Gate itself off the map. The overpowered Beast Vassals of the Fourth Primogenitor were, for all intents and purposes, useless more often than not.

"Hey...I'm just double-checking, but...there aren't *people* riding in those things, right?"

"I can say, with certainty, that there aren't. But...why do you ask, Sir Boyfriend?"

Perhaps alarm crept into Lydianne's voice because she sensed the intent behind his words. Yukina gasped, glaring at Kojou within the darkness as she cautioned, "Senpai, please wait. What in the world are you—?"

"Sorry, Himeragi. Hold this for me, would ya?"

Kojou tossed the smartphone—with Lydianne still on the line—to Yukina. Then, he glared at the security pods, still firing at them, through gaps in the pillar. And as he did so, abnormally dense demonic energy was leaking out of Kojou's entire body. Like mist, it wrapped around him all over, finally

transforming into a pale lightning bolt.

“Senpai...?!”

Yukina’s eyes opened wide in fright.

Kojou was not summoning a Beast Vassal; he was only drawing out the Beast Vassal’s demonic energy. He was controlling the power of the Fourth Primogenitor of his own will. This was a feat made possible because Kojou’s control rights over his Beast Vassals had been strengthened.

Still, this was irrefutable proof that Kojou’s body slowly but surely was nearing that of a complete vampire.

“Raaaaaaaagh—!!”

With a roar, Kojou unleashed the demonic power. A pure-white beam illuminated the underground tunnel, making it as bright as day. The resulting shock wave scattering lightning indiscriminately, mowing down the horde of security pods.

It was over in an instant.

Dozens of military security pods had been blown away without a trace, after which nothing remained but darkness and tranquility.

Yukina viewed the spectacle in stunned silence.

“Had to ram ’em, but it worked out somehow...”

Kojou’s breath was ragged, and he fell to one knee atop concrete that had been shattered by the impact. Thanks to his unconventional use of demonic power, every bone and muscle in his body screamed in agony. Even a small cough sent pain coursing through him like an electrical jolt. It was so rough that he could barely raise his voice.

And with Kojou unable to move, Yukina looked down at him, her shoulders trembling.

Her eyes were aflame with anger.

“Why do you always have to...do such reckless things...?”

“W-wait, Himeragi... Calm down! If you hit me right now, I’ll cry! Seriously! I’ll

cry!”

“...Haaah.”

Glaring at the now teary-eyed Kojou, Yukina sighed, seemingly deflated. She then crouched down and gently stroked Kojou’s back as if she were comforting a weak puppy.

However, as Kojou hung his head, it was during this brief moment of respite that he heard Lydianne’s voice delivering the coup de grâce.

“Sir Boyfriend... I am deeply reluctant to say this, but what shall you do about the monetary compensation? Those security pods may look cheap, but each one costs roughly twenty million yen to manufacture. A rather considerable sum.”

“Hold on... Repair costs are on *me*?! That was justifiable self-defense!” Kojou yelled, instantly forgetting the searing pain plaguing his body. Having to shoulder the cost of repair after being shot at without warning was just too unreasonable.

“But, all things considered, we art trespassing, therefore...”

When Lydianne calmly pointed out the detail he’d been neglecting in his argument, Kojou groaned, his words catching in his throat.

“Shiiit... If I don’t find some kind of proof that Asagi’s being held captive, I’m a criminal?!”

“I would strongly suggest that you make haste. ’Tis possible our intrusion hath been detected.”

“Yeah, yeah, I get it!”

Borrowing Yukina’s shoulder, Kojou wobbled as he rose to his feet. The pleasant scent of Yukina’s hair tickled Kojou’s nostrils, but he couldn’t afford to focus on that at the moment. According to the map displayed on the smartphone, they were nearing their destination: Stratum Zero. The distance was such that Kojou could reach it without difficulty, even with his stamina all but depleted.

Fortunately, Lydianne had apparently disarmed all anti-intrusion measures aside from the security pods. Kojou and Yukina arrived at the endpoint of the

underground tunnel less than five minutes later.

“This is...Stratum Zero...?”

Kojou came to a halt, bewildered as he surveyed the scene before him.

All he could see was a big, empty room.

The endpoint of the underground tunnel contained nothing whatsoever. More accurately, it was no more than an empty cavern.

It was a cylindrical space with a diameter of ten meters or so, and a depth of about fifteen meters.

This was the truth of the place called Stratum Zero.

Towering before them was a vertical wall built of sturdy-looking metal. The exterior wall had no doors or seams or even handholds for climbing. It was a completely sterile room without a single speck of dust.

It was a place that seemed to have no use whatsoever, save perhaps as a reservoir.

And so, Kojou and Yukina arrived at the bottom of that giant, empty hole.

At any rate, there could be no doubt that Kojou and Yukina had arrived at the right place.

After all, someone had gotten there before them. In the center of the enormous, hollow cylinder, a young man wearing a black martial arts outfit had arrived to await the two of them.

The young man was gripping a pitch-black spear. It was long and twisted, with tips on both ends.

“So you’ve come at last, Fourth Primogenitor.”

Slowly shifting his gaze toward Kojou, the young man spoke gently.

Kojou knew the young man’s name. He’d met him only once, on Harrowing Festival Day when the Prison Barrier was broken. He was the last of the seven sorcerous criminals who had escaped that day.

And he was the man with the “discontinued weapon” of the Lion King Agency...

“Meiga...Itogami...!”

Kojou’s voice echoed around the enormous cylinder.

Displeased, Meiga Itogami grimaced as he listened to the reverberation.

6

“It is an honor to be in your presence once again, Fourth Primogenitor.” As Meiga closed the gap between himself and Kojou, he spoke with a courteous tone. “Truly, I had expected to meet with you sooner...but that is all well and good. Thanks to the delay in our reunion, my wounds have healed.”

“Tch.”

Kojou clicked his tongue as he distanced himself from Yukina and dropped into a fighting stance. Pain consumed his every thought, but he could not allow himself the luxury of acknowledging it.

“You waiting for us means Asagi really is here, doesn’t it?” Kojou asked for confirmation.

Meiga smiled slightly as he said, “If I said the Priestess of Cain is not here... would you believe me?”

“Like hell I would! No way I’d just nod and trust the words of an escaped convict!” Kojou spat.

The appearance of the sorcerous criminal Meiga was hard proof that this was no ordinary place. There was no way Kojou could turn back without being certain of Asagi’s whereabouts.

“Hmm,” Meiga murmured as if he took offense to Kojou’s words. “I am a criminal, yes, but also I believe that you and I are more alike than you care to admit.”

“Oh, shut up!” Kojou, remembering the newly wrecked security pods, unwittingly bared his fangs. “Meiga Itogami, where is Asagi?! I’ll make you answer by force if I have to!”

Kojou gave Meiga a look that could kill. Meiga chuckled, as if demeaning him.

“Fourth Primogenitor, there seems to be some sort of misunderstanding.”

“Misunderstanding...?”

A crease formed in Kojou’s brow. The devilish grin was plain on Meiga’s face as he met Kojou’s glare.

“I am not interested in confronting you. Or rather, I do not feel threatened by you in the slightest. In fact, I’m feeling generous, so I’ll make you a deal. If you vacate the premises immediately, I’ll let you leave in one piece.”

“How very kind.” Kojou said with a sigh. He didn’t want to fall for a cheap taunt, but if Meiga was on the side of people using Asagi, he’d have to fight the guy either way.

“Now I’ve got a deal for you. If you release Asagi, I won’t tell Natsuki that you were here.”

For a brief moment, hearing Natsuki Minamiya’s name wiped the smirk off Meiga’s lips. The pitch-black spear he wielded emitted a bizarre miasma.

“That is unfortunate. I felt just a smidgen of kinship toward you, but now...I pity you; a pathetic young man deceived by the Lion King Agency, just as I once was—”

“Senpai, I shall handle this—!”

Yukina drew her silver spear.

But before that, Kojou leaped—a feat made possible by drawing out his vampiric might to the maximum. Neither Yukina, despite being aware of his fatigue, nor Meiga, poised and on guard, could respond to his speed.

“Let’s go, jailbird!”

Kojou dashed straight for Meiga, intent on punching him square in the face. It was the simplest attack he could think of. Kojou was not a genuine vampire; he held no pride toward a vampire’s abilities. If Meiga’s spear could nullify demonic energy, he would opt for a physical attack instead.

And as it happened, Meiga never saw it coming. Kojou’s mighty blow connected with Meiga’s chin, knocking him up into a somersault and blowing him away.

“Eh?!” Yukina stood dumbfounded, staring as Meiga sailed into the far wall and collapsed.

Kojou followed through with his punch before hunkering down on one knee, grimacing as pain washed over his entire body.

Meiga remained facedown, motionless. Even a demon possessing a powerful, resilient body, to say nothing of a normal human, could not have withstood such an attack. At the very least, Meiga’s lower jaw had to have been smashed to pieces.

“Ow, ow, ow... Damn it, I think I might have overdone it...a little?”

He’s not dead, right? Kojou wondered, looking at Meiga with an expression of concern.

However, only a moment later, Kojou heard a deep “Heh-heh” coming from the facedown Meiga. Driving a tip of his spear into the floor, Meiga slowly rose to his feet.

“I see. Knowing that Fangzahn can nullify demonic energy, you led with a normal punch... Naturally, even I wasn’t expecting that. It would seem I underestimated you, Kojou Akatsuki.”

Meiga moved his purportedly broken lower jaw and calmly smiled at him. He couldn’t have come out of that unscathed. And yet, he didn’t appear to be in any pain.

“However, unfortunately for you, an undying body is not a privilege exclusive to you vampires.”

Coursing from Meiga’s split lips was a dark liquid resembling decayed blood. He made no effort to wipe it off as he walked in Kojou’s direction.

“What’s with this guy...?!”

“An undead?! No, could he be...a jiangshi?!”

Yukina murmured in a raspy voice. The oddly malevolent ring to it instilled a sense of disgust in Kojou for no particular reason.

“Jiangshi?”

“A demon given life using a human being’s corpse... An artificial vampire.”

“Technically speaking, a poor excuse for a vampire,” Meiga corrected with a laugh at his own expense. “An incomplete bystander, able neither to live nor perish. But...that is why I am able to wield this weapon!”

Meiga glanced at his own feet as he swung the jet-black spear downward.

In only an instant, as Kojou stood defenseless, countless blades were thrust toward his body.

Dark blades, practically paper-thin, jutted from Kojou’s own shadow. They were formed of a dark aurora that ate into the world itself.

“Shit... This feeling! Is this the encroachment of Nod?!”

The dark blades, able to nullify demonic energy, robbed Kojou of his vampiric power. The effect was the same as when the knights of the Cleansers had employed relics of The Cleansing. Meiga’s Fangzahn was a weapon that controlled the encroachment of Nod.

“Snowdrift Wolf—!”

Twirling her silver spear, Yukina bore down on Meiga. The Schneewaltzer, capable of piercing any barrier, was the sole weapon capable of resisting the encroachment of Nod. In fact, Yukina had saved Kojou with that power several times during the fight at Kannawa Lake. Even so...

“It is futile. Have you forgotten? My Fangzahn nullifies both demonic *and* spiritual energy.”

...Meiga swung his spear with a leisurely smile. The two spear wielders collided head-on, but it was Yukina who was blown back. With extraordinary speed impossible for any normal person, Meiga continued the barrage of slashes. Yukina fell off-balance as spears of darkness rained over her.

“And with your spiritual energy sealed, you are nothing but an ordinary human. You could never defeat one such as I, who does not know death!”

“Ugh...ngh...!”

As she parried Meiga’s slashing attacks, Yukina’s stance wavered greatly due to Fangzahn nullifying her spiritual energy. At that moment, Yukina could

employ neither her Spirit Sight nor ritual spells to augment her physical strength. She was a powerless little girl.

Even so, Yukina's counterattacks reached Meiga without fail, lacerating Meiga's limbs and breaking several ribs on his left side. A normal person would surely have been put out of commission long before this point.

Yet, the movements of Meiga, the jiangshi, did not change. Meanwhile, Yukina was nearing the limits of her endurance.

Unable to withstand Meiga's slicing attack, Yukina flopped onto her back. With still eyes, Meiga looked down at her, seeing that she was unable to move, her breaths catching in her throat.

"And so, I shall kill the one Touka once saved. This ironic twist of fate suits me well."

Although Meiga's offhand murmur had been meant for no one in particular, his words made Yukina's breath catch in her throat.

"Miss...Touka? Why do you know that name...?!"

"Farewell, Priestess of the Divine Wolf..."

Meiga brandished his pitch-black spear. The bladed tip was sinking toward Yukina's chest, and in that instant—

"Himeragi, run!"

"Senpai?!"

—Kojou rammed his shoulder into Meiga's back, sending the man's slender body flying. Meiga turned to sullenly glare at the wounded Kojou.

Kojou must have yanked all the blades from his body himself. His body was in tatters, and his freshly bought parka was dyed deep crimson. His left arm dangled listlessly at his side.

In spite of this, Kojou stood in front of Meiga to shield Yukina from him.

Eyes coldly fixed upon the Fourth Primogenitor, Meiga slowly readied his spear in a stance known only to the Attack Mages of the Lion King Agency.

"No, senpai! Run—"

Before Yukina could finish, Meiga silently swung his spear. The movement was muted...surreal. Kojou, and even Yukina, had no time to react.

“Hell-Eater Wolf—”

A second too late, they heard Meiga’s voice. The black spear had impaled Kojou through the heart. The blood that exploded from Kojou’s wound painted Yukina’s face red.

Yukina’s voice trembled.

“Sen...pai...”

Kojou’s body tumbled onto the metal floor. A scream erupted from Yukina’s mouth.

As she tried to get up, Yukina’s hand touched the silver spear that had rolled onto the floor.

The darkness enveloping the empty room was pierced by a pale, dazzling beam.

“U...aaa...aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaagh—!!”

The radiance pouring out of Yukina’s back traced a giant symbol in the air.

Setting eyes upon it, Meiga’s expression stiffened for the first time.

The encroachment of Nod unleashed by the black spear shattered into dust like thin panes of glass—and vanished. Fangzahn was unable to nullify Yukina’s overwhelming spiritual energy.

“Absurd... This power—don’t tell me this is...?!”

Meiga’s lips contorted into shock. Steam was shooting upward as his purportedly undying body was scorched. As the beam buried his field of vision, Meiga narrowed his eyes and trained his spear toward Yukina.

“Now you’ve done it, Lion King Agency! Was this your true objective all along...?!”

Dragging his wounded body along, the black-clothed man drew closer to Yukina.

She had already lost consciousness. Drawing on spiritual energy beyond her

limits had been more than her body could withstand. The light from her spiritual energy enveloped her, but in that moment, Meiga could kill her— No.

He *had* to kill her.

But as he raised his black spear, the voice of a supposedly dead teenage boy reached his ears.

“I, Kojou Akatsuki, inheritor of the Kaleid Blood, release thee from thy bonds!”

“What?!”

Meiga’s eyes swayed with hatred.

Kojou, presumably dead from being impaled through the heart, raised his right hand up with a devilish grin.

The pure-white beam unleashed by Yukina was the cause. That radiance had destroyed the encroachment of Nod, restoring Kojou’s lost immortality and power. This was the power of the World’s Mightiest Vampire—the Fourth Primogenitor.

“C’mon over, Beast Vassal Number Five, Regulus Aurum—!”

There appeared a blinding pillar of light and a thunderous shock wave as Kojou’s lightning lion decimated the room known as Stratum Zero. The demonic power was overwhelming, making the very ground of the artificial island shudder. That golden radiance swallowed up Kojou’s field of vision, with the hollow space of Stratum Zero soon to follow—



CHAPTER THREE
THE SPEAR AND
THE ANGEL

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THE SPEAR AND THE ANGEL

1

Demons were denizens of darkness. Many of them loved the night, and so the dark hours of the city were no time for rest. It was after midnight, and a large throng of people could still be seen along a road in Itogami's Island West.

Along that road, a woman came to a halt. She had wings on her back, and her cheeks were rosy from intoxication. She looked up at the side of a building, upon which the comely face of a teenage girl was being displayed.

"Ah, it's Asagi."

Different pedestrians in the area turned their gazes to the building's big screen all at once. A young man sighed a wistful "ohhh" as if he was in love with the girl on the screen.

"Who's that? An actress?"

"No, no. She's a local idol. A regular resident of Itogami Island."

"I've seen her before! She was buying waffles at Thetis Mall."

"Was she cute?"

"Suuuper-cute!"

The easygoing conversations continued as they gazed at the image of the girl. People all across the city fawned over the girl on the screens.

All at once, their expressions were suddenly clouded with confusion. Abruptly, the image of the girl on the screen became heavily distorted. The girl's song had cut off at some point. Within the static-filled, monochrome screen, the girl's lips seemed to tremble as they struggled to form words.

“...jou... Sa...”

What came through the speakers was a simple, mechanically synthesized voice, quietly broadcast to every corner of Itogami Island through the countless electronic devices existing within its shores.

Even the promotional video looked bizarrely glitched.

As bewildered looks came over the masses, they stood dumbfounded as they listened to the girl’s words.

“Kojou... Save...”

Then the screen suddenly went dark. Someone had cut the transmission short.

All that remained was the darkness of night and the stirring of the crowds.

2

The first thing he could see through his hazy vision was a pair of eyes staring down at him in concern. They were deep, serene blue eyes, reminiscent of an immaculate glacier.

It was a white, sterile space greatly closely resembling a hospital room. Beautiful silver hair swayed under an artificial white light.

“Akatsuki, are you awake?”

As Kojou was lying there, he heard a gentle voice close to his ear. Realizing that the girl was familiar, Kojou gasped and sat up.

“...Kanase?”

“Are you all right? You are not in pain anywhere?” asked Kanon Kanase. She was wearing a white gown for some reason. The ephemeral scene made him wonder if he was still dreaming.

The bed upon which he’d been sleeping was the kind found in hospital examination rooms. Somehow, it also felt like a bed used for autopsies. The room’s walls bore no windows, and as he took in his surroundings, he saw a number of unfamiliar medical instruments.

Kojou then realized that his entire body was wrapped in bandages.

“Yeah, somehow. Kanon, were you the one who took care of me?”

“I-it was no trouble,” she quickly replied—unusually fast for her—and blushed. The unnatural way in which she averted her gaze made Kojou subconsciously follow it.

“Eh? It was?”

“I am accustomed to caring for cats, and I have taken some in for castration, so...”

“R-right...”

It was then that Kojou realized he wasn’t wearing any clothes. The only thing on him was a thin layer of bandages over his entire body. Beyond that, he was naked. Buck naked.

The clothes Kojou had originally been wearing were bloodstained, thanks to Meiga, and there was no avoiding stripping them off to apply medical treatment. Even if he did have a vampire primogenitor’s body, recovering after having one’s heart *completely destroyed* would take time. He didn’t care for being compared to a cat, but if anything, the fact that he’d made Kanon see him like that made him feel downright awful.

“Where is this? Natsuki’s place? Did Natsuki get me out of Stratum Zero?” Kojou asked in order to change the subject.

Kanon shook her head and said, “No, Akatsuki. Apparently, you and Yukina were found lying on the beach, around the connecting bridge to Island North.”

“That’s on the opposite side of the tunnel we used, isn’t it...?” Kojou murmured, perplexed.

Island North meant a minimum of two kilometers removed from Keystone Gate’s Stratum Zero. Of course, neither the wounded Kojou nor Yukina had any requisite endurance remaining to travel that far. He didn’t think Lydianne and company had aided them on their end. Someone had brought the unconscious Kojou and Yukina out of Stratum Zero. And apparently, whoever had done so had not captured the two of them but had left them there—and departed

without them.

“It was Big Sis who found the two of you lying there.”

“Big Sis?” As Kanon continued her explanation, the creases in Kojou’s brow deepened. “Who?”

“I do not know her, but she said to call her that. She was very pretty.”

“...The hell?”

This person is textbook suspicious, thought Kojou, thoroughly beside himself. Furthermore, she sounded rather brazen. Kojou didn’t know many people who would insist that a middle-school girl they were meeting for the first time call them anything like *Big Sis*.

Who the heck is she? he pondered, and in the very next moment, without warning, the door behind Kanon violently burst open from a kick.

“Kojou Akatsukiiiiiii...!!”

Swinging a long, silver sword, a tall, slender girl came rushing in, yelling in a shrill voice. Her chestnut ponytail was bouncing wildly.

“Th-the hell...?! Kirasaka?!”

Kojou looked back, eyes bulging at the sight of Sayaka in a blind rage. Kanon was so surprised that she was too stiff to even raise her voice.

Heedless of the white-gowned Kanon, Sayaka glared only at Kojou, lying upon the bed.

“So this is where you were, Kojou Akatsuki! How could you do such a thing to my precious Yukina—?!”

“Huh...?!”

Before Kojou could ask *Do what?* a silver flash of light rent the air. With Kojou lying on the bed, Sayaka thrust her long sword toward him as she shouted more threats.

“I’ll kill you!”

“Uwaagh?!”

Just barely evading the attack, Kojou yelped as he retreated to a nearby wall. The blade of the long sword in Sayaka's grip had deeply impaled the bed Kojou had been resting on a moment prior.

Sayaka split the bed in two, repositioning her sword as she said, "Don't run, idiot! You're the worst!"

"Wait, calm down! What the hell did I do—? Agh!"

"Ah...?!"

As Kojou leaped, the bandages slid right off him. Kojou's naked body was blatantly exposed before the pair's eyes. Witnessing this from up close, Kanon stiffened, frozen in place.

For her part, Sayaka was swinging her sword when her eyes widened, her movements coming to a halt.



“Wha...?! Wh-why are you showing that to me, Pervogenitor?!”

“It’s your fault for coming out swinging outta nowhere, dammit!!”

“Shut up! Be quiet! Turn to ash!”

Sayaka’s face was beet-red as she flailed her sword about. There was no longer any stance or form to it. Kojou shielded Kanon from the indiscriminate swings as he retreated.

Finally, wheezing and out of breath, Sayaka wobbled and sank to the floor. “I-it’s because you’re like this that Yukina...that Yukina’s life is all messed up...!”

Still gripping the hilt of her sword, she raised her voice like a child and began crying.

Dumbfounded, Kojou watched Sayaka as tears streamed down her cheeks. Her actions, which came off as deranged, left him in a state of utter confusion.

“K-Kirasaka...?” As tears continued to mar Sayaka’s face, Kojou timidly called out to her. “What happened to Himeragi? Where is she?”

“Akatsuki, Yukina is in the room next door. But you should put these clothes on first—”

As Sayaka continued to cry, it was Kanon, finally recovered from her shock, who answered in her stead. Her words reminded Kojou of his current state.

“A-ah. Right. My bad.”

Pulling up a blanket to hide his body, Kojou accepted the clothes offered to him: boxers sold at a convenience, a brand-new pair of pants, and a shirt, still wrapped in vinyl.

“A uniform for our school? Did you get this, Kanase?”

“I am sorry. Your clothes were all shredded, Akatsuki, so...” Kanon bowed her head in spite of having done nothing wrong. “I am sorry for getting them without your permission.”

“Don’t be,” he said, shaking his head. “That’s a big help. That bastard Meiga Itogami got me pretty good and all...”

“Meiga Itogami... He’s a fugitive from the Prison Barrier, isn’t he...?”

Sayaka still had tears welling in her eyes when she murmured, her voice sounding like an echo from the bottom of the Earth. She glared hatefully toward Kojou with unfocused eyes.

“Yes... He hurt Yukina, didn’t he...? So did you take his head, Kojou Akatsuki?”

He grimaced. “No, I didn’t take his head. What is this, the Warring States period?”

At Stratum Zero of Keystone Gate, with all those sacrifices made, Kojou had still been unable to defeat Meiga. He searched his hazy memories and could faintly recall someone stopping the Beast Vassal that Kojou had unleashed just before it could burn Meiga to cinders.

It had been an enormous mass of demonic energy rivaling even Kojou’s Beast Vassals. All sight of Meiga vanished during the momentary gap when the lightning lion’s movements were sealed. It was a being controlling demonic energy on par with the Beast Vassals of the Fourth Primogenitor—that being had impeded Kojou’s attack and had saved Meiga’s life. Kojou and Yukina being brought out of Stratum Zero and left on the beach was probably this person’s doing, too.

“More importantly, is Himeragi safe?” Kojou asked Kanon once he finished dressing, shaking his head at the situation. The identity of the interloper tugged at his mind, but there were more pressing matters.

“Yukina is safe, but...” Kanon kept staring at Kojou as she swallowed the words she was about to say.

A moment later, someone entered the room, walking over the remnants of the kicked-down door as if there was nothing strange about it at all.

She was a beautiful elf with light-green hair. Beneath a white cloak, the woman was wearing a white priestess-like outfit that came with a custom, no-slip skirt. Riding upon her shoulder was a beautiful black cat with golden eyes.

When Kojou looked over at her in surprise, she mischievously narrowed her eyes.

“Mm-hmm. So you have awoken, Kojou Akatsuki. How is your physical condition?”

“You’re...Professor Kitty?! Oh, so you’re the one who found us...” Kojou sighed when he realized the true identity of the self-addressed Big Sis mentioned by Kanon.

Now that he thought about it, of course it had been the Lion King Agency’s Yukari Endou—the woman chasing after Yukina—who had been the first to find them as they were lying on the beach. He could also accept her being brazen enough to call herself Big Sis.

“I have heard most of the circumstances from Yukina. It seems my bumbling disciples have caused you quite a bit of trouble.”

Yukari looked from the destroyed bed to the crying Sayaka and bowed her head.

Kojou, getting an inkling that her unexpectedly admirable conduct was really a way to deflect questions, twisted his lips as he said, “Ah, nah... It wasn’t really any trouble but... I mean, what is this situation? Where the heck am I?”

Suddenly, a middle-aged man with a shady visage appeared behind Yukari, replying, “This is my laboratory, Fourth Primogenitor.”

It was a face Kojou recognized, but his presence was even less expected than Yukari’s.

“You’re...Kanase’s dad...?” Kojou murmured, sounding and appearing utterly dim-witted.

He belatedly glanced at Kanon, whose cheeks were red as she lowered her eyes, conflicted. This shady-looking man, Kensei Kanase, was the former court sorcerous engineer for the kingdom of Aldegia as well as Kanon’s adoptive father.

“I pulled a few strings and hired this man to examine Yukina. Thanks to that, I have created a debt to the Aldegian princess that I had not desired to create,” Yukari explained, seeing through Kojou’s confusion.

“Examine Himeragi?” Kojou’s expression turned grave. He didn’t know and didn’t care to whom Yukari had created that debt, but that she was so set on having Kensei Kanase’s help bothered him.

Yukari gave a nod rich with implication. “That’s right. At present, this man is the world’s leading expert on Faux-Angel.”

“Faux-Angel... What?”

The unexpected phrase threw Kojou for a loop.

Faux-Angel was a sorcerous ritual passed down in the magically advanced kingdom of Aldegia. It was the forbidden, secret art of spiritually evolving a human being to create an artificial angel. Once upon a time, Kensei Kanase had used that ritual on Kanon, his own daughter.

“Wait a—‘Examine,’ you said... What does Faux-Angel have to do with Himeragi...?!”

As Kojou’s lips trembled, Yukari gazed at him rather coolly as she pointed out, “It would seem that something is on your mind, Fourth Primogenitor.”

Kojou averted his eyes and clenched his fist. He recalled the pure-white beam that Yukina had unleashed at the height of the battle with Meiga Itogami. The bizarre symbols etched in the air, the vast spiritual energy surpassing human limitations—they greatly resembled the power that Kanon had once controlled when she became a Faux-Angel. The purging light had been called spiritual essence at the time.

“Himeragi...broke Meiga Itogami’s encroachment of Nod... Was that the power of Faux-Angel?”

“The encroachment of Nod...you say? So that man has mastered Fangzahn to such an extent...” Yukari sighed like she admired him. In response, Kojou shot her a reproachful glare.

“He said his spear was a discontinued weapon from the Lion King Agency.”

“Yes. Fangzahn is a divine armament developed by the Lion King Agency. It and the Schneewaltzer are like siblings. However, the black one is a failure.”

“What’s Meiga Itogami doing with a thing like that?”

When Yukari made her statement like it had nothing to do with her, Kojou’s dismay was evident as he replied with another question. Having seen Fangzahn’s might for himself, he couldn’t simply accept it being referred to as a

failure.

However, Yukari smiled boldly, seemingly testing Kojou. “I believe you already have a hunch.”

“...Meiga Itogami is involved with the Lion King Agency.”

Pained by the thought, Kojou spat out the words. Yukari quietly nodded in affirmation.

“Correct. He was an Attack Mage dropout hired by the Lion King Agency as a magical researcher—a developer of new divine armaments. However, that applies to when he was an ordinary human being.”

“Meaning, before he became a jiangshi?”

Resting his body against the broken bed, Kojou sullenly crossed his arms.

As a person, Meiga Itogami came off as the soft, intellectual type. Kojou could accept his real identity being that of a researcher. Compared to Yukina, a proper Attack Mage, Meiga’s skills in weapon techniques weren’t any better than that of a regular martial artist. What made him frightening was the immortality of his jiangshi body as well as Fangzahn’s abilities.

“I do not know the finer details, only that the man died once in an accident during a Fangzahn experiment. When he appeared before the Lion King Agency once more several years later, his body was as it is now. As for whose doing it was, well, I have my guess.” Yukari snorted in irritation.

“Who?” Kojou spontaneously pressed.

“Senra Itogami—Meiga’s grandfather.”

The name made Kojou hold his breath.

Senra Itogami—it was a name known by every resident of the island. He had been famous worldwide as an authority on sorcerous construction. He was also the person who designed Itogami Island. Certainly, a man like him could have recovered his grandson Meiga’s corpse and revived him as a jiangshi...

“I heard there was quite a bit of controversy over how to treat Meiga upon his return. But in the end, the Lion King Agency accepted Meiga Itogami’s return to the organization. After all, his revival as a jiangshi did not mean his prior

memories had been lost, and his genius for divine armament development was quite impressive, you see.”

“So you hired a human being who ought to have been dead as a researcher?”

“If the Lion King Agency didn’t hire demons, I wouldn’t be with them, would I?”

The elven Yukari received Kojou’s reproachful-sounding words with an unconcerned laugh.

If they had exceptional abilities, they’d use demons like Yukari or minors like Yukina and others. That was the Lion King Agency’s way. Special government agency or no, he supposed they couldn’t deal with large-scale sorcerous disasters unless they were willing to let the ends justify the means.

“Of course, that doesn’t mean the terms of employment are the same as for a human being. Meiga was obligated to undergo regular medical checks and counseling, and an observer was assigned to him.”

“An observer...?”

That piece of information shook Kojou. He was trying to reconcile his past encounters with Meiga with his own current situation.

After a brief pause, Yukari replied, “Touka Fujisaka, Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency—wielder of the ancient divine armament once dubbed Snowdrift Wolf.”

“The first...Snowdrift Wolf, then...?”

Kojou could hardly choke the question out. Even Sayaka, still sitting on the floor, opened her tear-drenched eyes wide in surprise. There was a divine armament before Yukina’s Schneewaltzer known as Snowdrift Wolf—apparently, that was news even to Sayaka.

“Touka...? What happened to her?”

“She is no longer with us. She was most recently dispatched on an emergency mission befitting a Sword Shaman. We never saw her again. It was immediately afterward that Meiga Itogami fell to become a sorcerous criminal. Before Natsuki Minamiya captured him and threw him into the Prison Barrier, he killed

thirteen Attack Mages of the Lion King Agency.”

“Because this Touka woman died, huh?” Kojou let out a heavy, pained sigh.

Yukari casually shook her head and said, “Though it was not such a simple tale, it became the version on the surface—that Touka Fujisaka was mortally wounded fighting a group of shamans all by herself, dying in the process.”

“...On the surface—? So there’s more to her story...?”

When Kojou inquired further, Yukari smiled thinly. “Yes. The truth is slightly different. Surely, Touka dying in the line of duty is not enough for Meiga to hate the Lion King Agency so?”

“Yeah... I guess not,” Kojou agreed.

If Touka Fujisaka was slain by sorcerous criminals, Meiga’s anger would logically have been directed at the perpetrators. As a reason to become a sorcerous criminal himself, murdering his Lion King Agency cohorts—it just didn’t match up.

But that only held up if the Lion King Agency was telling the truth.

“Touka did not die—she evolved.”

“Evolved...?”

Yukari’s words, ignoring the prior chain of events, instilled a vague uneasiness within Kojou.

“A side effect of Snowdrift Wolf: artificial spiritual evolution leading to a shift into a higher-dimensional being... In other words, angelification.”

With Kojou and the others at a loss for words, Yukari surveyed their expressions before making a particularly blunt statement.

“Touka became a Faux-Angel...*just as Yukina is becoming one now.*”

3

Meiga Itogami awakened atop moist, magically produced soil. It was commonly known as graveyard soil.

The rumor that cursed soil granted vampires power was merely an old wives' tale—but as one of the four great elements, its effectiveness as a sorcerous catalyst was real. Thanks to this, the majority of the wounds Meiga had suffered in his battle with Kojou Akatsuki had already healed. However, it was not Meiga who had provided the soil.

Meiga slowly sat up, surveying the area without a word.

He was on the deck of an enormous cruise ship.

Someone had filled a pool normally reserved for guest use with the catalyst soil. Furthermore, they had also erected a simple barrier around the pool—a barrier that increased the base regeneration speed of undead flesh. The owner of this setup apparently knew the intricacies of the undead well. Without fanfare, Meiga's black spear had been placed at the side of the pool.

"I see you are in high spirits, Meiga Itogami. How do you feel upon your awakening...?"

As Meiga rose to his feet, he heard a beautiful voice mixed with laughter coming from above.

A young man was standing at the edge of the upper deck. His elegant blond hair danced in the moonlight.

It was a vampire wearing a pure-white three-piece suit. In his hand rested a glass containing a deep-red liquid.

"I see. So it was you who intercepted the Fourth Primogenitor's Beast Vassal at Keystone Gate's Stratum Zero... Dimitrie Vattler, Duke of Ardeal."

Meiga, brushing soil off his entire body, strained to produce a smile as he sighed.

Meiga's martial artist uniform was singed, and he had lost his beloved pair of glasses. Still, having been attacked by a Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor, escaping with no more than that level of damage was nigh miraculous.

Seizing the momentary opportunity when Fangzahn had been neutralized, Kojou Akatsuki's summoned lightning lion had attacked—and what had saved Meiga from that attack was an enormous serpentine Beast Vassal with bladed

scales covering its entire body.

If it was a Beast Vassal from Dimitrie Vattler, known as the vampire closest to a Primogenitor himself, even resisting a Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor was no great mystery. And so, Vattler had brought Meiga, rendered immobile, out of Stratum Zero.

“I’m sorry, but I took the liberty of giving you a corpse’s arm to replace the one that the Fourth Primogenitor destroyed. I judged that a jiangshi’s regenerative ability could not repair it, you see,” Vattler said, tossing him a carefree smile.

“No... I thank you for being so considerate.”

Meiga courteously bowed his head. A jiangshi, a warped thing to begin with, did not have regenerative ability on par with an Old Guard vampire. He might have been immortal in name, but if his flesh was destroyed, that would be the end for him. There was no way to regenerate lost limbs save stealing the missing components from other corpses and sewing them together. Vattler’s reasoning was spot-on.

“However, do allow me to ask. Why did you save me? If you are aware of Stratum Zero’s existence, you have realized our true objective, haven’t you?” Meiga inquired suspiciously.

“The return of The Cleansing, yes? I look forward to it,” Vattler replied without missing a beat.

Meiga narrowed his eyes in slight annoyance.

“If the project succeeds, humanity shall gain the means with which to eradicate all demons from this world—even you, and the vampire primogenitors, won’t be able to avoid destruction.”

“Then I want to see The Cleansing revived all the more.”

Vattler’s smile was exquisite. Meiga sardonically raised the corners of his own lips.

“Even if your whim results in the extermination of all demons?”

“But of course,” said Vattler, ferociously baring his fangs. A somber darkness

swayed within his beautiful eyes. “Perhaps you didn’t know... The so-called Old Guard vampires, we’re all bored stiff of this whole eternal life business.”

Quietly tilting his glass, Vattler trickled the deep-red liquid down his throat. The ghastly aura rising from his entire body was such that even Meiga, whose body purportedly lacked any warmth, shuddered from the chill he felt in his spine.

“The world facing its demise would be the greatest of amusements remaining to us—wouldn’t you agree, Meiga Itogami?”

“Then I shall strive to live up to your expectations, Your Excellency. It is the least I can do to repay you for saving this false life.”

Picking up the black spear at his feet, Meiga made a single, very deep bow.

Vattler raised one eyebrow. Somehow, his expression registered regret that his conversation with Meiga had come to an end.

“Going already?” the vampire asked.

“Yes. There is something left that I must do before becoming an enemy to your kind...”

Meiga traced a teleportation magic circle in midair.

Vattler made no attempt to stop him. Watching as the black-clothed young man seemed to fade away, he made an exaggerated, pitying shake of his head.

“Revenge against the Lion King Agency...? Such a hollow thing. If it is combat you seek, you should make combat itself your objective...a far purer thing. Do you not think so, Tobias, Kira?”

Vattler murmured to himself as silver mist swayed and hovered behind him. That mist finally increased in density, transforming into the forms of two young men. Tobias Jagan and Kira Lebedev—these were nobles of Europe’s Warlord’s Empire, members of the militant vampire faction and Vattler’s close confidants.

However, the eyes with which they gazed at their leader were brimming with an air of unconcealable concern.

“—Are you truly fine with allowing that man to go, Your Excellency?” Tobias asked. The sharp features of his handsome face were reminiscent of a cold

blade as he glared bitterly at Itogami Island, illuminated by the moonlight.

Vattler looked back at him with an unexpectedly calm and collected expression.

“But of course. Not only dead, but a pathetic puppet controlled according to Senra Itogami’s schemes—an actor suitable for an island of trash constructed of scrap metal and magic. Besides, the power of the Cleansers is said to be able to destroy even a primogenitor. A rather deeply interesting ensemble, is it not? If such a thing is true, I would very much want to obtain it myself.”

“...That is why you are our esteemed leader.”

Vattler’s words could be taken as rebellion against the primogenitors. Tobias just made a pained smile of resignation in response.

Kira touched his right hand to his chest, reverentially lowering his eyes. “We are the same. We only feel alive in the middle of conflict. Even if half the world is reduced to ash, we shall accompany Your Excellency in your sport until the very end.”

“This is nothing so grandiose, merely a sideshow before the banquet.”

Vattler raised his glass up to the moonlight, swirling the red liquid as a sinister smile played over his lips.

“Now, my beloved Fourth Primogenitor. The time is nigh. This twisted land, that pitiful doll, and the fake angel shall all be your playthings.”

4

The first thing Kojou felt was not surprise, but suspicion. Was everyone playing some kind of elaborate practical joke on him? He could not help feeling wary.

The bewilderment filling him, half of which was an effort to escape from reality, finally turned into rage.

“Himeragi’s becoming a Faux-Angel... What the hell do you mean by that?!”

Kojou closed the distance with Yukari, violently grasping her shirt. Seeing this,

Sayaka's expression stiffened in fear, but Yukari made no special effort to resist him, coolly looking up at him instead.

"You have seen it, too, have you not? Yukina using the Faux-Angel power to save you..."

"Ugh..."

"There must have been some indication beforehand, though asking a non-Attack Mage such as yourself to notice them would be quite unreasonable. That girl surely advanced along the road to angelification as she drew on spiritual energy beyond her limits."

Yukari betrayed no emotion in the casual tone with which she continued her explanation.

Kojou, largely having been brushed off, pulled his hand away from Yukari's collar and said, "What happened—to the ritual?"

"Ritual?" asked Yukari, knitting her brows, unsure of what he was asking.

"Didn't it take a big sloppy ritual involving candidates killing one another to make a Faux-Angel?!" Kojou shouted, his voice going raw. It made Kanon shudder.

The plan to mass-produce Faux-Angels as executed by Kensei Kanase involved a number of girls engaging in mortal combat, even inflicting heavy damage on Itogami Island's urban areas. The candidates participating in that combat included Kanon herself—Kensei's daughter.

It was he who replied to Kojou's misgivings:

"That was because forcing the human body to become an angel requires a vast quantity of high-power spiritual cores." Displaying neither pride nor remorse toward his own crime, he solemnly stated the facts, continuing, "It takes the spiritual core circuits of seven people, enhanced to the highest limit of what the human body can endure—and by transplanting all of them into a single human body, a complete Faux-Angel is finally born."

"Then what gives with Himeragi?! There's no way she's stolen even a single person's spiritual core in all this time!"

Kensei wordlessly nodded, then proceeded to rebut him. “But...she had the Schneewaltzer.”

“Himeragi’s...spear...?”

“The Divine Oscillation Effect created by the Schneewaltzer is one and the same as the divine essence controlled by a Faux-Angel. One might call her weapon, which draws upon her spiritual energy and converts it to divine essence, a mock spiritual core—and an exceptionally high-output spiritual energy circuit at that. Of course it would have an effect upon her body.”

“That’s the side effect of Snowdrift Wolf—?”

Kojou’s expression twisted in anger as he glared at Yukari once more.

Snowdrift Wolf and a Faux-Angel each controlled the very same power—Kojou knew that for himself. After all, he’d seen Yukina’s spear and the attacks of Kanon as a Faux-Angel offset each other multiple times, up close and personal.

“What the hell’s with that?! Are you just fooling around?! Why did you Lion King Agency people give Himeragi that spear to use?! Dammit—!”

“Only a precious few compatible people can employ Snowdrift Wolf. The reason an inexperienced Sword Shaman like Yukina was selected to be your observer was because she possessed exceptionally high compatibility with that spear,” Yukari answered.

She closed her eyes before continuing. She shook her head, as if anguished slightly. “But thanks to that, the girl’s angelification has advanced far faster than the Lion King Agency expected. The current incident came as a complete surprise, even to us.”

“...What’s gonna happen to Himeragi?” Kojou asked, holding back his frustration. Blaming Yukari and the others was meaningless at that point. Even Kojou understood this, but that didn’t mean he could completely divorce himself from his feelings.

Kensei explained in Yukari’s place:

“If in a state without the spear active, her Faux-Angel awakening rate will be

between Stage Two and Stage Three—a level that poses no hindrance to everyday life.”

Kojou let out a sigh of relief. He couldn’t comprehend what was meant by those stages, but when he thought of Kanon’s prior angelification, it didn’t seem to be any great problem.

“It’s not like Himeragi’s going to just vanish all of a sudden, right?”

“The possibility is extremely low,” replied Kensei in a manner very much like a sorcerous engineer.

“However, should she employ the Schneewaltzer—her awakening rate shall surpass Stage Five. It is easiest if I say that it would be like when you engaged Kanon in combat. If she expends a large amount of spiritual energy in that state, angelification shall likely accelerate all at once.”

“Wha...?”

The color drained from Kojou’s cheeks. Sayaka, perhaps having expected Kensei’s answer, remained unresponsive as she listened to the discussion.

Yukari made a weary-looking smile and shook her head. “It would no doubt be best if she stayed far from ritual spells that amplify spiritual power, such as the Spirit Archery that I employ, to say nothing of divine armaments such as Der Freischütz and the Ricercare. It is simply out of the question.”

“Wait a... Then Himeragi...”

“She will never recover...as a Sword Shaman, at least.”

Yukari’s declaration was blunt. Kojou bit his lip. Yet, he had the odd sense of things falling into place. He could understand why Sayaka had lost her cool to that extent and why her anger had been so intense.

From dawn to dusk, Yukina had undergone rigorous training from a young age for the sole purpose of becoming a Sword Shaman. Now her power as a Sword Shaman had been taken from her. Kojou could vaguely imagine just how cruel such a thing was. So, too, could he understand how to Sayaka, who grew up together with Yukina, it felt like half her body had been ripped away.

“It is nothing that need pain your thoughts, Fourth Primogenitor. This is my

responsibility as her master.”

Yukari made a frail, self-deprecating smile. She stroked the back of the cat she held close to her.

“Does Himeragi know about—?” Kojou began to ask when Yukari, albeit a little conflicted, interrupted him, drawing her shoulders inward.

“That girl shall hear it from my lips when she awakens. Therefore, Fourth Primogenitor—may I ask you to retire for now? Yukina would not wish for you to see her in a depressed state.”

“You’re saying to leave Himeragi here and go home?” He shot a cold stare Yukari’s way.

“The Schneewaltzers are the Lion King Agency’s secret weapons, you see. By rights, they are not things to be spoken of to outsiders. Me relaying this classified information to you was to serve as an act of good faith.”

Then Yukari shot Sayaka, fresh from bawling her eyes out, a sullen glare as she declared, “I will assign Sayaka to you until the next observer has been decided. Play nice, won’t you?”

Sayaka’s head shot up in surprise as she quietly murmured, “Huh? Me?” Kojou grumbled a “Seriously?” as he stared down at her. After all, she had tried to kill him just a short while ago.

Sayaka’s and Kojou’s gazes pulled toward each other, and when they met, they sighed simultaneously.

““Give me a break,”” the deflated pair groaned as Kanon anxiously watched the sides of their faces.

5

Kensei Kanase’s laboratory had been located in the lowest underground stratum of Island North. The place most closely resembled a prison cut off from the outside world. As the mastermind behind the Faux-Angel incident, he was under strict watch as a sorcerous criminal to this day.

At the entrance to the lab, Sayaka flashed her Attack Mage license to the guards. As she did so, she dragged Kojou along with her while leaving the isolated district.

From there, not a word was exchanged between the pair until they returned to the surface. She'd tried to kill him. He'd seen her crying face. Both found the situation too awkward for words.

That is, until they left the underground road, and Sayaka murmured, "Ever since..."

At some point, night had apparently given way to dawn. The needlessly intense tropical belt's early morning sun brightly illuminated the buildings of the district.

"Ever since I met Yukina for the first time, I've thought of her as an angel. She was cute, serious, kind, pretty... I never dreamed she'd turn into a real angel."

Sayaka laughed in a dry voice. Perhaps that was her way of trying to make peace, but put bluntly, Kojou wasn't laughing. It was painful to see Sayaka forcing herself to put up a strong front.

"Not like Himeragi's much of an angel, y'know," he retorted, sounding like a sulking child.

Over the course of the last half year, Kojou had been with Yukina on a near-daily basis, but he'd never felt anything from her that could be considered even remotely angelic.

"She broods, she does all this reckless stuff, she's scared of planes, she likes mayonnaise way too much, and she's obsessed with this weird cat mascot..."

"That's what's cute about her... Yukina really must be an angel."

When Kojou levied his complaints without hesitation, Sayaka blatantly ignored him as she delivered that absentminded comeback. That doting behavior was just like her. Kojou genuinely admired Sayaka's unwavering love.

"Man, nothin' phases you when you've got Yukina on the brain. I kinda respect that."

"N-not that I particularly want respect coming from you—ah, more

importantly, Kojou Akatsuki, don't you think things through at all? If Yukina stops being a Sword Shaman, you might never meet her again for all you know."

"Wouldn't that be convenient from your point of view...?" Kojou pointed out with an air of annoyance.

Don't get close to my Yukina! was the sort of complaint Sayaka normally leveled to such an extent that having her suddenly act worried about him made it hard to react.

Perhaps aware of that inconsistency, Sayaka said, her voice high-pitched from a bit of nervousness, "Eh? Ah.....well, that's true, but—I mean, my Yukina's purity mustn't be sullied by you any further!"

"I haven't sullied it! And don't say easy-to-misunderstand stuff like that so loud!" Kojou shouted, conscious of nearby gazes. It was early in the morning on Island North, which had rows of corporate and university laboratories. The sidewalks for people heading to work and school did have a few pedestrians. Even so, Kojou and Sayaka stood out in the area because of their high school outfits.

"Anyway, Himeragi's just an ordinary human being, so living life with normal happiness is a hell of a lot better than turning into a Faux-Angel and vanishing—or some stupid thing like that," Kojou murmured, almost as if saying it for his own benefit. If it meant Yukina wouldn't vanish, he'd decided that never seeing her again would be worth it. In the first place, Kojou and Yukina were not technically friends. They were merely a vampire that was a target for observation and a watcher dispatched by the government to observe him.

Sayaka, staring at Kojou as he tried to accept reality in that fashion, haltingly asked, "What is normal happiness?"

"Huh?"

"We were groomed to become Attack Mages ever since we were little kids. At this point, even if you told me to live a normal, happy life, I would have no idea what to do with myself."

"It's not like she'll be kicked out of the Lion King Agency just 'cause she can't continue as a Sword Shaman, right?" Kojou asked. Still, he couldn't shake his

unease.

Yukina was a serious person with a good head on her shoulders. Even if she couldn't be combat personnel, there had to be any number of jobs she could do. Plus, there was no way the Lion King Agency would let go of a girl with enough spiritual power to turn her into a Faux-Angel.

"Well, that's true, but..."

Sayaka paused awkwardly. Then she turned straight to Kojou with a serious expression and stated, "There was a do-it-yourself spiritual energy testing kit in Yukina's room."

"Spiritual energy testing kit?"

"She knew beforehand that...in the near future, she wouldn't be able to be a Sword Shaman anymore..." Sayaka murmured.

Kojou felt like his heart had skipped a beat. He, too, had realized Yukina had been in an odd state for a while. And yet, Kojou had not thought deeply about why that was.

"Why'd she keep quiet to me about it? She actually knew why Professor Kitty wanted to meet with her, didn't she?"

"No doubt she ran because she knew. She wanted to save Asagi Aiba before being sent back to High God Forest."

"Even though she might vanish as a result of that? Why would she...?"

Kojou recalled the exchange he'd had with Yukina on the way to Keystone Gate's Stratum Zero. She'd said there was nothing wrong with her body—Yukina had been dead set on going with Kojou, even though she was obviously lying about her state. He didn't understand the reason why. Surely she had no reason to save Asagi if it meant risking her own annihilation.

However, Sayaka seemed to understand how Yukina felt. She turned to Kojou with a gaze that had just a hint of envy in it. "To her, *that* is normal happiness —"

Suddenly, Sayaka gasped and came back to her senses. With Kojou standing still in bewilderment, she stomped on his foot with complete abandon.

“Forget I said anything! And die, you idiot!”

“The hell are you suddenly getting pissed off for?!” Kojou screeched, teary-eyed from having the heel of a shoe stomping the top of his foot.

Perhaps satisfied at seeing Kojou in such a pathetic state, Sayaka sunnily straightened her back. Blatantly thrusting out her chest, she spoke in a condescending manner.

“Well, for all those reasons, I’m going to help you rescue Asagi Aiba.”

“You are, Kirasaka...?”

Seeing the surprise on Kojou’s face, Sayaka hurriedly averted her gaze. “N-not for your or Asagi Aiba’s sakes, but for Yukina!”

“Oh, uh, well, that’s a huge help and all...”

Taking in the real reason for Sayaka’s sudden offer of cooperation, Kojou let out a sigh of befuddlement. It was then that a tiny figure rushed closer, heading in the pair’s direction.

It was a girl wearing a very finely made elementary school uniform. Its defining feature was the adorable beret she wore over her red hair. Running through a crosswalk, the girl made a big wave of her hand toward Kojou and Sayaka as she called out:

“Sir Boyfriend! Sir Boyfriend, is it not?!”

For some reason, she spoke in an exaggerated tone, like something out of a period drama.

“Who?” Sayaka grumbled as she glared at Kojou. *You’ve even laid your hands on little girls...?* spoke her suspicious gaze.

“...Who are you?” asked Kojou, wariness on his face as he stared at the girl.

“It is I, Lydianne Didier! Sir Boyfriend, art thou suffering from amnesia?” she asked, lifting her head indignantly.

That was when the girl and Kojou’s memories finally gelled. When he’d first made her acquaintance, she had been dressed in some funky outfit; he didn’t recognize her in proper clothing.

“Ah...you, huh? That’s right, you’re in elementary school, aren’t you?”

“Indeed. I dost attend Tensou Academy’s elementary school.”

Lydianne was a bit proud of herself as she displayed her uniform from the famed school.

When he thought about it, he hadn’t spoken to the girl since they’d infiltrated Keystone Gate’s Stratum Zero. Judging from the nervous way she had come running, maybe she’d been searching for him ever since she lost contact with him after his fight with Meiga.

“Sorry. There’s no way I could have gotten in touch since that bastard Meiga Itogami busted up my smartphone. I must’ve made you worry.”

“’Tis nothing, ’tis nothing,” Lydianne casually replied as Kojou deeply bowed his head. Then, she abruptly locked eyes on Sayaka, standing at his side, when she asked, “Oh my? Thou art Lady Shamanic War Dancer, art thou not?”

“What, you know her?” said Kojou, checking with Sayaka without thinking.

“We met...a while back. This is the first time I’ve seen her outside of that tank... Wait, you mean you talk like that normally...?”

“Indeed. A warrior speaketh not with a forked tongue.”

Sayaka’s exasperation was met with an unapologetic reply. *One, you’re not a warrior. Two, you’re using that line wrong,* Kojou thought in a half-hearted jab.

“What about Iblisveil?” Kojou asked, getting back to the matter at hand.

“That young liege took his leave last night, having secured my safety.”

Lydianne touched the watch on her wrist with her hand as she spoke thusly.

That instant, a tank the size of a car swayed as it emerged behind her back. Apparently, it had been using ritual spell camouflage to remain out of sight. The basic silhouette was the same, but there were minor design differences between it and the machine that had been destroyed the night before.

“So a spare tank got you here, huh?”

Do you normally bring a tank around with you like that? Kojou grimaced with a heavy sigh. Seeing that she had obtained a new tank, Iblisveil must have

decided Lydianne required no further protection.

“May I introduce you to Hizamaru II. ’Tis the drills equipped for close combat that art this machine’s pride and joy.”

Lydianne proudly pointed to the drills that had been attached to the tank’s forelegs. To be blunt, Kojou wasn’t sure how effective the odd design would be in actual combat.

“O-okay. I think it looks cool. But that’s just me... Er, more importantly, Lydianne, what gives with Stratum Zero? There wasn’t a single girl there, let alone Asagi.”

“My investigation was insufficient. There is no excuse.”

Kojou’s forced change of topic made Lydianne bow her head immediately. The information that Asagi was confined in that place had indeed been inadequate.

“However, I can plainly state that I have solved the mystery of Stratum Zero. Stratum Zero is no mere floor of Keystone Gate. In truth, this place doth be a hidden submarine base.”

“Submarine base...?”

Kojou’s expression went blank as he stood still.

Keystone Gate’s Stratum Zero: a chamber referring neither to the surface nor underground. No, it was the point where the artificial isle was zero meters above sea level—the same height as the surface of the sea.

The mysterious chamber was ringed by a stout wall that could resist water pressure. Keystone Gate’s Stratum Zero was a place where repair and resupply could be conducted on a submarine, thus fulfilling the conditions to be a base.

“Then you’re saying Asagi Aiba’s location is—”

With Kojou gawking, Sayaka questioned Lydianne in his place.

Lydianne gravely nodded, shifting her gaze toward her own feet.

“Indeed. In truth, the C within which Lady Empress is confined is the submarine housed within Keystone Gate’s Stratum Zero. In other words, Lady

Empress's current location must be the bottom of the sea underneath Itogami Island—at a point four hundred meters deep.”

6

The yellowish-brown soup filling the porcelain bowl gave off a particular aroma. With a ladle, she carefully skimmed that soup, gently pouring it into her mouth so she could taste it.

“Mmm, delicious...!!” Letting the soup roll over her tongue, Asagi Aiba murmured to herself, quite content.

She wore her school uniform cutely askew and had fallen in love with an extravagant hairstyle. It was trendy high school chic fashion that had nothing to do with her role as a local idol.

“Menya Itogami's thick seafood soup really is the best. The meat's so fresh and extra spicy, too...”

Her audible slurping of this ramen did not impart a vulgar image because she was the product of fine upbringing, unaware of her behavior. Neatly polishing off the noodles and toppings, she drank the last of the soup to the final drop and said “What a feast,” bringing her hands together.

That instant, the ramen bowl in front of Asagi transformed into glittering particles and vanished.

In its place, the latest issue of a fashion magazine appeared in her hands. Summoning her favorite sofa and cushions out of thin air, Asagi rested upon it in a slovenly posture.

“Mm, this skirt from *Best Answers* is kinda cute. The panties here aren't bad, either, but that color is a problem. Could pick a safe monotone one, or even an animal print... Hey, Mogwai. What do you think?”

Waving her bare feet about, Asagi called out to her partner AI. However, the sarcastic voice she would normally be hearing made no reply.

“...Mogwai?”

Asagi stopped flipping through the magazine as her face abruptly turned serious. She slowly rose to her feet.

That instant, the magazine, the sofa, and the cushions vanished from Asagi's sight. The only things remaining were the eternal darkness that spread on and on, and binary data that blinked in and out like countless stars.

This world where only light and darkness existed was a virtual reality created from the five supercomputers that controlled Itogami Island and Asagi's own mind—in other words, cyberspace.

However, unlike normal cyberspace, this world was imbued with a distinctly magical nature.

By installing the information preserved in Cain's Coffin into Keystone Gate's Stratum Zero, the island's internal computer network acquired the functionality of a magical barrier. And now that this Cyber Barrier had pulled the flesh and blood of its current administrator, Asagi, inside of it, she was shut inside that barrier.

Because her physical body had been made into one of the parts maintaining that Cyber Barrier, Asagi could not leave. As far as physics went, she was in the same condition as Natsuki Minamiya, who had been absorbed into the Prison Barrier. In other words, this Cyber Barrier was a dream created from Asagi's mind. It was a dangerous dream, one imprisoning Asagi's physical body and even able to affect the real world.

Natsuki was able to remotely control a clone of herself created by magic and freely move it around, even in the real world. However, Asagi could not do anything similar. The most she could manage was to wedge herself into real-world networks and seek Kojou's aid.

On the other side of the coin, Asagi could act freely inside the Cyber Barrier like some kind of god. She could bring any food or magazine to herself that she pleased. Creating her favorite pieces of furniture was trivial. All she had to do was imagine it, and she could change her makeup, clothes, and hairstyle as she pleased, but that was pretty much it.

"Aaah. Figures, but I'm just sick of this. Having everything go according to my thoughts is way more boring than I expected— Hey, that goes the same for you,

doesn't it?"

Speaking aloud, Asagi slowly surveyed the area. Then she called out into the darkness seemingly devoid of any other life.

After a momentary lag, apparently from bewilderment, a young girl's voice reverberated. It was a raspy voice mixed with static, like from an old vinyl record.

"So clever, Cyber Empress—you have already mastered the sandbox, it would seem."

Particles of light coalesced, and another girl appeared.

It was a beautiful girl Asagi did not know. She had lustrous black hair, but her race and nationality were unclear; she looked like she could be from any country, from any era—she was simply mysterious.

"Oh, cut that out. Even *you're* gonna call me by that embarrassing nickname? Ugh..."

Asagi inquired with the sort of tone you used when asking an old friend. The girl's lips trembled. Apparently, she had intended to smile.

"Then please cease to address me as High Priestess. That would *make us even*."

"I don't exactly mind if you just call me by my actual name..."

Asagi twisted her lips. The black-haired girl stared expressionlessly at her with large eyes.

"You already understand all this, do you not, Asagi Aiba?"

"Since I've been shown the contents of the Coffin, well, yeah."

Asagi smiled listlessly as her shoulders sank. The information inside the Coffin really meant the memory of Cain, the Sinful God. Accordingly, Asagi was not afraid of the black-haired girl. Asagi already knew—the reason she could intrude into the Cyber Prison where no one other than herself could presumably exist. So, too, did she know the girl's true identity.

"Are you fine knowing the truth of this world?" the black-haired girl inquired,

seemingly scolding Asagi for being able to smile. Asagi stuck her tongue out a bit and said:

“Hey, I’ve been living in this world since the day I was born. Telling me to worry about it now is kinda pointless. I was raised in a Demon Sanctuary, after all.”

“Even knowing one exists, who would use that Demon Sanctuary in an attempt to destroy the world?”

“Got a point there,” said Asagi, making a show of sinking into thought for a moment. “That does kind of get under my skin.”

“Then would you care to make a deal with me?”

Moving only her lips, the black-haired girl gave a thin smile.

“A deal?”

“I have the ability to liberate you from this place...from this world of eternal solitude.”

“You mean put yourself here in my place,” said Asagi, exhaling in visible displeasure. “So? What do you want out of it, High Priestess?”

“This curse...”

The girl’s reply was quick. Her long black hair swayed as it floated up within the abyss.

“This eternal, accursed stigma for wielding the Sinful God’s power—”

“Um, okay then...” Asagi shook her head in exasperation.

In a sense, it was the reply she had expected. That was what disappointed her.

“Unfortunately, no deal, High Priestess,” she declared.

“Why? Do you not wish to return to the outside world?”

“That’s certainly an attractive offer, but what meaning does revenge have if you don’t enact it yourself?” Asagi waved her index finger in a theatrical *tut-tut* gesture. “Besides, do you know the saying—a cursed person falls into two pits? If you obsess over something like a stupid curse, it’ll only bring you misfortune.”

“Misfortune...you say?” the black-haired girl murmured before releasing a long, quiet sigh.

The girl was wearing a crude robe resembling bandages wrapped over her entire body. She pulled at them, unraveling them, and they fell to her feet. Her nude body stood exposed within the darkness.

“Does a greater misfortune than this appearance exist?”

“High Priestess... You...!”

She had a beautiful physique, perfectly symmetrical. However, her body was riddled with deep cavities that looked like puncture wounds; her body seemed as if it had been torn asunder and then forcibly reassembled.

“I pity you, abominable priestess of the Sinful God. I shall paint the colors of my eternal resentment and lament upon you. Know the curse of my blood!”

Darkness trickled from the black-haired girl and dyed the inside of the Cyber Barrier pitch-black. The effect looked much like a computer network being infected by a virus.

Asagi’s body, hovering in the Cyber Barrier, was encroached upon and swallowed by the darkness—then vanished.

All that was left was a laughing voice—the crazed laughter of a girl lusting for revenge.

7

After checking to make sure the silver spear was still inside, Yukina clicked the fastener of her guitar case shut.

She was in a small lab room outfitted as a hospital room, and she was alone. Falsely claiming that she was not feeling well, she had chased Kensei Kanase and the others out of the room.

As Yukina wore a hospital gown, silver-colored butterflies were resting upon her hair. These were *shikigami* butterflies Yukina had created with a ritual spell. With them, she had overheard the entire conversation.

Including Meiga Itogami's past and her own angelification...

"Yukina."

Surveying the area, seemingly to evade prying eyes, Kanon entered the room. She was clutching Yukina's neatly folded school uniform to her chest.

"I...washed your uniform. Also, these—they're mine, but you can use them if you don't mind."

Kanon handed her a fresh pair of underwear and shoes. It was somewhat embarrassing, but in that moment, Yukina could not be more grateful for her consideration. Having been repeatedly exposed to sea breezes, rain, and constant combat with Yukari and Meiga, Yukina's own underwear was in tatters.

"Sorry for all the trouble..."

Yukina thanked Kanon as she changed into the new garments.

It was Yukina who had forcefully asked a reluctant Kanon to smuggle in Snowdrift Wolf and a change of clothes. She knew that her request was a selfish one, but Yukina had been certain from the start that Kanon would aid in her escape. If Kanon's and Yukina's positions were reversed, Kanon would surely make the same decision—and Yukina knew that.

She would save Kojou, even if it was at the cost of her own existence. That was Yukina's decision.

"I'm the one who's— Sorry. You're the one who saved me when I was turning into a Faux-Angel, Yukina, yet..."

Kanon clasped her hands together before her chest, about to break into tears.



Now that it was Yukina who was turning into a Faux-Angel, Kanon was powerless to save her—such was her lament.

“Kano, you have nothing to apologize for. Besides, it was Akatsuki-senpai who saved you back then. No, not just then, he’s always—”

Yukina shook her head with a pained, gentle smile.

In the span of half a year since Yukina had begun observing him, Kojou had always been saving someone. Sometimes it was the people of Itogami Island, sometimes his little sister and classmates of hers, sometimes Kanon, and sometimes even Yukina herself—

Possessing the power of the World’s Mightiest Vampire, he was always using it for someone else.

That was why Yukina had to save him now.

Why? She didn’t need to even think about the reason. Yukina was his observer.

“Let me ask but one thing of you,” Kanon said when Yukina had finished changing clothes and hoisted her guitar case over her back.

“Hmm?”

Yukina turned to her in surprise; she thought it was very unlike Kanon to voice a request at a time like this.

Kanon took Yukina’s hand and whispered, “Come back to us, Yukina.”

Without a word, Yukina looked back at the tears gathering in Kanon’s eyes. She could not lie to Kanon. She could make no promises. Therefore, Yukina tried her hardest to think of something to say, settling upon but one word.

“Thanks.”

Immediately afterward, Yukina Himeragi headed out of the laboratory.

However isolated from the outside world Kensei Kanase’s lab might be, it was not guarded well enough to stop a Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency—let alone Yukina, who wielded a Schneewaltzer that could rend any barrier.

With a sulky expression, Yukari Endou, chin resting on her palm, watched

through a monitor as Yukina disabled the security and made her escape with ease.

With a somber expression, Kensei called out to her as he sipped on his coffee. “Are you fine with letting her go like this?”

“This is what she’s decided. She can do as she pleases,” Yukari scoffed. Her light-green eyes remained half-shut.

However, behind her sulky voice, a soft smile came over her lips.

“We elves live so long that we might as well have no lifespan at all, but the hearts of many of us are already dead, with bodies left to their own devices like ancient corpses. Between our way of living and that girl’s chosen path, who’s to say who is happier— What is so funny?”

Noticing the pained smile coming over Kensei, Yukari lifted her head in obvious displeasure.

Kensei’s expression returned to its original sullenness. “It’s nothing important,” he said. “I remembered what the Fourth Primogenitor said to me previously. Namely—do not decide on your own what happiness is for your daughter nor force it upon her.”

“That boy really speaks however he pleases. He does not know how hard things are for those who live as long as we do. *Tch*,” Yukari grumbled bitterly.

The black cat familiar atop her lap made a purr that seemed like a laugh. “Damn you, Fourth Primogenitor,” she murmured, distinctly irritated. “If anything happens to my adorable disciple, I shall see to it that he suffers a fate far worse than death.”

“Agreed. In preparation for if that man might make my daughter cry, I completed a vile anti-primogenitor curse. Are you interested?”

Kensei spoke in a completely sober tone. She could not judge whether he meant it.

Yukari burst out with visible delight, “Oh, by all means, show me. When it comes to the suffering of immortal nuisances, I believe I can offer a few words of useful advice.”

“I see. I imagine that shall be quite informative.” The former court sorcerous engineer of the kingdom of Aldegia gave a weighty nod.

“Ha-ha,” Yukari laughed. Afterward, she slowly opened her right hand. In her palm was a tiny silver ring.

“If possible, I had hoped to avoid using this...”

The whisper Yukari wove like a prayer silently melted away in the darkness below the artificial isle.

8

Clad in an extravagant dress, the witch’s raw displeasure was palpable.

She was a small-statured federal Attack Mage with a childlike face—Natsuki Minamiya, the Witch of the Void.

“Calling *me* over with a single phone call like I’m some pizza delivery service... You really think you’re hot stuff, huh, Ponytail of the Lion King Agency? And you, Kojou Akatsuki—”

“Ah... Um... Th-that’s... Wait a— Cut that...”

Looking ready to break into tears, Sayaka desperately resisted being dragged along by her ponytail.

They were in front of an event venue near the back entrance to Keystone Gate. Since Sayaka had erected a person-repelling barrier, there was no sight of pedestrians in the surrounding area. Directly below the venue was the chamber known as Stratum Zero. If Lydianne’s deduction was correct, Asagi was confined in a submarine submerged in the sea farther below.

“Hold on, Natsuki. You have every right to be angry, but the circumstances here— Ow!”

When Kojou opened his mouth to cover for Sayaka, he suddenly reeled backward, letting out a cry. He had sustained a ferocious blow to the forehead from the tip of the fan Natsuki held in her hand.

“Don’t call your homeroom teacher by her first name...especially now, when

I'm in a particularly sour mood."

"Strict corporal punishment is totally messed up in this day and age... Dammit..."

As Natsuki gave him a pitying look, Kojou glared back with teary eyes, shaking his head a bit.

Natsuki snorted as she finally released Sayaka.

"As for why you've summoned me here, does it have to do with the little girl who has the airs of an entertainer?"

"Yeah... It's not so much that she's tryin' to perform. It's that she's not the real Asagi..."

"A forgery created with CGI? Sounds about right."

"Wait, you noticed?"

Natsuki's calm reply astonished Kojou.

"The genuine Asagi is more charming than this, after all."

Natsuki made the chilly statement as she gazed at a poster of Asagi plastered over the side of a building. Her tone was as haughty as usual, but somehow, Kojou sensed affection for her pupil in her voice.

"Lady Instructor, dost thou know the location of the genuine Lady Empress?"

Poking only her head out of the robot tank, Lydianne addressed Natsuki. The fact that she'd called Natsuki *instructor* reflected the formal side of her typically eccentric personality. Having seen Kojou get smacked in the forehead, she had apparently learned from his mistakes.

Natsuki must not have minded it, for her gaze went from cruel to gentle as she shifted it Lydianne's way and said, "Keystone Gate's Stratum Zero—Cain's Coffin, yes?"

"You knew about it?" Kojou asked, surprised.

"Of course. I am her homeroom teacher." Natsuki proudly raised her chin. "And the present location of the Coffin?"

"The bottom of the sea directly below Itogami Island—a depth of some four

hundred meters. Currently, I hath dispatched an underwater drone to determineth a more exact location, but...” Lydianne glanced at her cockpit instruments.

Natsuki, unamused, twisted her lips and said, “And? Are you telling me to bring her out?”

“I couldn’t think of anyone else I could ask. It ain’t a depth people can dive to.” Kojou frowned in chagrin.

“Indeed,” said Lydianne in agreement, adding, “I hath heard that Sir Boyfriend doth not know how to swim...”

“Even if I could, you can’t normally dive four hundred meters down, sheesh!” he retorted, angry without realizing it. “I thought of a way to use my Beast Vassals in a worst-case scenario, but that doesn’t exactly sound like bringing Asagi back safe and sound. Though, with Natsuki’s teleports—”

Natsuki gazed at Kojou and the others with the unmoved eyes of a doll as they continued their attempts at persuading her. Then she made a very deep sigh, as if genuinely disappointed.

“Goodness. I had heard Shamanic War Dancers of the Lion King Agency were experts in curses and assassinations—clearly the rumors were exaggerated.”

“H-huh?!”

Sayaka’s eyes snapped wide at the insult levied at her title with pinpoint accuracy. Natsuki shot her an expression of contempt as she continued.

“Did you seriously think that with something as crucial as the Coffin, the device at the core of reviving the Sinful God, they would neglect to deploy a magic repulsion barrier...?”

“I—I see... A barrier...!”

Sayaka gasped and covered her mouth. She was a Shamanic War Dancer of the Lion King Agency, yet, she’d let something as basic as that slip her notice. Small wonder Natsuki had treated her like an idiot.

“Meaning you can’t teleport inside the sub, then?” Kojou let out a groan, his voice catching.

Natsuki nodded without fanfare and clarified, “Not only teleports. Every manner of scrying magic is also a lost cause. Water considerably dampens magical energy to begin with. From the surface, it is impossible to confirm that Aiba is even inside the submarine.”

“So that’s why you’ve let Asagi be, Natsuki? You couldn’t save her even if you tried?” Kojou murmured, coming to accept the situation on his own.

Most likely, Natsuki was worried about Asagi, her student. She, too, desired to save her somehow. However, with Asagi confined beneath the waves, she was out of Natsuki’s reach. Ashamed of her own powerlessness, the Witch of the Void had surely shed tears where none could see—imagining things that far, Kojou sympathized with Natsuki.

Although, Natsuki seemed to take Kojou’s baseless conclusion as a slight to her self-respect. *What?* her glare at Kojou challenged.

“To whom are you speaking? If I was inclined, I would have brought Asagi out long ago.”

“Er, you don’t need to be all proud and stuff—”

“It isn’t pride!” pointedly retorted Natsuki. “Even if I had to hurl Astarte into the sea, the barrier of the Coffin is nothing to me!”

“What kind of devil are you...?! You’re freaking me out. I’m gettin’ chills just thinking about it!”

The Beast Vassal of the special homunculus named Astarte could nullify physical attacks and possessed the ability to destroy magical barriers. Certainly, she might be able to resist water pressure at a depth of four hundred meters, and she could probably destroy the submarine’s barrier, too.

That said, the thought of taking a powerless-looking homunculus girl in the flesh and hurling her to the bottom of the sea was kind of—

With a shudder, Kojou reconfirmed just how frightening Natsuki could be.

Natsuki returned to a quiet tone of voice as she spoke.

“Besides, even without going through the trouble of such crude methods, the Coffin will return to Keystone Gate. That is what Stratum Zero is for.”

Stratum Zero was a submarine base. The thick metal floor was probably an airlock. The part below was directly connected to the sea, and from it, one could enter the submarine directly. Not a single resident of Itogami Island even knew it existed. And therefore, even if Itogami Island incurred such damage that it collapsed, the submarine—Cain’s Coffin—could take refuge at the bottom of the sea, safe and sound.

“Are you saying that the submarine will come back to take supplies?” Kojou inquired.

However high spec a submarine, it could not remain submerged forever. It had to require regular replenishment of fuel, food, and air.

But Natsuki bluntly shook her head.

“No. Rather, because the preparations are in order.”

“Preparations?”

For what? Kojou knit his brows.

“Oho,” went Natsuki, smiling as she shifted her gaze to behind him. “Preparation for The Cleansing. Is that not right—Hell Wolf?”

“—?!”

Kojou lowered his posture in surprise. Sayaka reflexively drew her sword. Lydianne closed her tank’s hatch, shifting to an alert posture.

Breaking Sayaka’s person-repelling barrier, a black-clothed young man appeared.

In his left hand, he gripped a bizarre black spear with tips at both ends. This was the former researcher of the Lion King Agency, escapee from the Prison Barrier, and jiangshi—Meiga Itogami.

“Fourth Primogenitor, where is the Sword Shaman?”

Somehow, the words spilling from Meiga’s mouth surprised Kojou. After all, he had displayed little interest in Yukina up to that point.

“Himeragi, you mean...?”

Kojou replied, wary due to the strange aura he was picking up from Meiga.

The man's current state was clearly different from when they had fought the night before.

Thanks to having lost his glasses in combat, the hollow eyes characteristic of a jiangshi were all too clear. His black clothing remained charred from where he'd sustained the attack from Kojou's Beast Vassal. Nor, at that moment, did Kojou sense any power in the spear Meiga held in his left hand.

Those were not the only changes in Meiga, though. Kojou couldn't put his finger on it, but even so, he knew one thing: Meiga had undergone a fundamental change.

"...Yes, her. Yukina Himeragi."

If anything, Meiga said Yukina's name with a gentle expression.

So he really was displaying a bizarre obsession with Yukina. The fight the night before was probably the trigger for that. Yukina had displayed a fraction of a Faux-Angel's power—irritating Meiga in the process.

"She won't be fighting anymore. You're never gonna see her again," Kojou declared almost in a growl.

Whatever Meiga's objective, Kojou could not let him and Yukina come into contact with each other. Before that could possibly happen, he had to defeat Meiga then and there—

Sayaka was probably thinking the same thing. Transforming her silver longsword into a recurve bow, she notched a ritual arrow. This was the true form of Der Freischütz, the Lion King Agency's prototype area-suppression weapon. She no doubt meant to squish Meiga flat with a maximum-power attack out of the blue.

"An escapee from the Prison Barrier—I remember him. I just have to capture that man, right?"

Sayaka aimed her ritual arrow at Meiga. Not only could it serve as the catalyst for the giant shock wave from Der Freischütz that generated large-scale ritual spells, it boasted overwhelming might that could completely flatten its target. Even if Meiga's black spear nullified the ritual spell, it surely could not block the shock wave itself.

“Former Lion King Agency researcher, jiangshi, or whatever, whoever lays even one finger on my Yukina, I’ll curse to death, slice to death, shoot to death, chop into pieces, and burn to ash!”

With a tone that somehow felt unhinged, Sayaka muttered her complaints. Meiga stared at her with wide eyes.

“So she ran...before being annihilated by the shift to a higher-dimensional being...”

Meiga’s teeth made an audible grinding noise. A faint, flickering radiance floated upward from his entire body. In truth, this radiance was from the lines of strange symbols blotting out Meiga’s own flesh.

“Did you think I would accept such a thing...?! ”

Meiga bellowed, his emotions laid bare. That instant, Itogami Island—no, the world itself—trembled. The luminescence enveloping Meiga’s entire body increased, spreading over the land of the artificial isle.

“Ngh?! ”

As Kojou and company stood dumbfounded amid the unanticipated phenomenon, Lydianne let out a high-pitched sound. With a nervous voice, she reported over the robot tank’s trembling exterior speakers:

“Sir Boyfriend, Stratum Zero has begun to fill with water! Also, there be unfamiliar data over the netw... What is...this volume of traffic...?! ”

“Meiga Itogami, don’t tell me you’re—?! ”

The fan in Natsuki’s hand flashed forward, and golden chains shot out from the void.

“C’mon over, Al-Nasl Minium—!”

Kojou moved in tandem. He instantly summoned his Beast Vassal, forgetting all about collateral damage to the surrounding area.

“Lustrous Scale!”

Sayaka unleashed her ritual arrow a second later.

The countless chains shooting out like bullets, the shock wave created by the

ritual arrow, and the blast winds enveloping the bicorn's hooves—each assaulted the place where Meiga stood.

The concentrated volley was an overkill of destructive power, seemingly excavating the ground in its wake. It was not an attack on a scale a jiangshi's body could endure. But...

“No way...!”

“You’ve gotta...be kidding me...?!”

Sayaka and Kojou both murmured in astonishment. Natsuki clicked her tongue.

Meiga Itogami—no, the being that had once been Meiga, stood there, unharmed.

Kojou's and the others' attacks had not reached his flesh. Rather than being blocked, they had been completely nullified. It was as if their attacks against him had never existed to begin with.

Meiga Itogami's being was enveloped by faint particles of light that began to erode Itogami Island itself.

It was a type of phenomenon Kojou and the others had never seen before. It was neither attack magic, nor ritual magic, and certainly not a normal physical phenomenon. It differed from the encroachment of Nod.

But with everything that touched that radiance, something fundamental... changed.

It was just like a supernatural being, albeit the same shape as before, that was neither part of the living nor the dead—

“If she shall not appear on her own, I shall drag her out of hiding—even if I must alter the world itself to do so!”

Meiga Itogami, transformed into a supernatural being, made his declaration in a voice full of madness.

The words served to state that the despair had begun.



CHAPTER FOUR
THE CLEANSING

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THE CLEANSING

1

In a suite of the highest caliber in the City Hotel—constructed on the outer edge of Keystone Gate—Akishige Yaze listened to the report.

“The Coffin has been released, you say...?”

“Y-yes. Of the Five Elements, Schedar, Caph, and Ruchbah have exceeded maximum designed activity rate. Tsih and Segin’s activity rates have also climbed. A large-scale Cleansing reading has been measured within the island. The origin point is the external event space on Keystone Gate’s Stratum Three—close to directly above Stratum Zero!”

Through the monitor, the researchers’ faces spread with the color of unconcealable fear. These were men who had long served Akishige Yaze—chairman emeritus of the Gigafloat Management Corporation—and had been involved in Itogami Island’s construction; in other words, they were trusted subordinates to Akishige, deserving of being called his retainers. That was why they were afraid. They knew the ramifications of the Coffin becoming unmoored. They knew all too well what effect that would have on Itogami Island.

“Meiga Itogami’s doing, I take it? So the lapdog feels like biting the hand that feeds him... Damned mongrel,” Akishige murmured sourly as he gazed at the reports sent to him one after another.

The release of the Coffin meant that the submarine, Cain’s Coffin, had docked with Keystone Gate’s Stratum Zero and had connected to Itogami Island’s isle-wide network.

As a result, the magical program sealing the Coffin had been input into

Itogami Island. It was the magic once known as The Cleansing—the forbidden god-killing ritual created by Cain, the Sinful God—reproduced in digital form.

But it was not the issue of the release of the Coffin that had Akishige in a sour mood.

After all, even if the Coffin was released, that alone would not initiate The Cleansing.

There were three conditions required to activate it: one was the existence of Itogami Island, the altar for that purpose; another was the release of the Forbidden Ritual sealed in the Coffin; and the third key was the will of the living sacrifice that served as the control unit and the key to the activation—in other words, the Priestess. As long as the Priestess of Cain, the genius cyber-mancer surpassing all human limitations, remained untamed, it was impossible to initiate The Cleansing.

Asagi Aiba was the one and only suitable person to be the Priestess of Cain yet discovered. And both her parents were already under Akishige's surveillance—as hostages. Akishige himself was the only one who could use a direct line to Asagi Aiba now that she was confined in the Coffin. It was impossible for anyone else to engage in negotiations with her.

And yet, Meiga Itogami had initiated The Cleansing nonetheless.

That meant Meiga, through whatever method, had obtained a new priestess.

This was why Akishige was in a sour mood. It was a situation that his organization should have prevented from arising.

“—It would seem that you are busy, Chairman Yaze. Should I come back another time?”

As Akishige furrowed his brows, a foreign man sitting on the guest sofa addressed him. He was in his forties, an Asian man, but the paleness of his skin and his ever-present smile were his defining traits.

Standing beside the man was a baby-faced woman, her age indeterminate. It wasn't that she didn't have an adorable face, but thanks to half-closed eyelids that did not want to open, she somehow gave off a sleepy impression. There was a very fluttery air around her that made her hard to pin down.

“Forgive my rudeness, President Ren. The ruckus is unfortunate, but it is also a good opportunity. I would like you to behold the power of the reproduced Cleansing with your very own eyes.”

Akishige Yaze swiveled his chair around to face the man sitting on the sofa. The monitor on the wall was displaying images of the areas surrounding Keystone Gate. Something like an explosion was in the middle of one of them.

“The Cleansing... The ultimate hidden ritual instigated by Cain, the Sinful God, for the sake of insurrection and vengeance against the gods?” the man called Ren asked in a gentle tone.

Shahryar Ren, president of MAR—founder and chief stockholder of Magna Ataraxia Research Incorporated, one of the world’s foremost international sorcerous corporate conglomerates.

“However, just how do you intend to prove that power’s worth?”

Shahryar Ren’s question brought an impetuous smile out of Akishige Yaze, as if Ren had just hit the nail on the head.

“Is the Fourth Primogenitor insufficient as an opponent?”

“Kaleid Blood... The World’s Mightiest Vampire, was it?” Ren raised his brows in a show of admiration.

Akishige Yaze gravely nodded his head and said, “Indeed. The Duke of Ardeal, Dimitrie Vattler of the Warlord’s Empire, and the vile prince Iblisveil Aziz of the Fallen Dynasty have been dispatched to monitor him. If all three are exterminated here, would you be able to say our Cleansing is not all that we determine it to be?”

“I suppose not. It is exactly as you say.” With a gentle gaze, emotions unreadable, he stared straight at Akishige. “However, what is it that you intend to gain by instigating a new Cleansing, Chairman?”

“Hmph,” went Akishige, curling his lips up a bit. “Europe’s Warlord’s Empire, the Middle East’s Fallen Dynasty, and Central America’s Chaos Zone—surely you understand what these dominions all have in common, President Ren?”

“Oil, natural gas, rare metals—valuable underground resources, in other

words.”

“Most astute,” said Akishige with a nod. “We shall eliminate all demons and liberate the peoples held captive in the dominions.”

“And obtain the mineral rights to those lands, yes?”

Ren’s teasing words brought about a nod from Akishige lacking the slightest twinge of guilt.

“Should our zaibatsu join hands with MAR, I believe the possibility of bringing this to fruition is very high. What say you?”

“It is a deeply interesting topic.” Ren crossed his legs. Then his gaze shifted to Akishige’s. “However, for that purpose, The Cleansing has to be under your control, correct?”

“What do you mean by this?”

“Pardon me. But it is my belief that The Cleansing taking place upon this island has divorced itself from your influence—”

Ren pointed that out with a serene smile. In the next moment, the suite’s interior was filled with a strange, jumbled sound.

It was Akishige who knit his brows and turned around. The wall-mounted monitor behind him was displaying heavy static, which finally changed into the shape of a lone girl—a beautiful girl with long black hair.

The girl wore nothing more than a thin robe, causing her to resemble a nymph from ancient times. Her limbs poking out of the sleeves and hem were covered in cruel scars, as if she had been sewn together.

“Heh...heh-heh...heh...ha...!”

The beautiful but unsightly girl crudely laughed inside the monitor.

Her hollow eyes were gazing straight at Akishige.

“Fools... You are fools, descendants of the greedy usurper. As if such heresy would grant thy wish. The key to The Cleansing is already within my hands. Sink together with this accursed island!”

“So this is the Priestess of Abel from the reports...,” Akishige spat. Shifting

toward the terminal on the writing desk, he addressed the pale-faced researchers once more.

“What is the Coffin’s situation?”

“The signal has been cut. There is no response from the Priestess of Cain. As before, the Five Elements are operating just within the limits—they have been hijacked from the outside!”

The researcher’s words, sounding like a scream, made the corner of Akishige’s eye twitch.

“So you are the one controlling The Cleansing, you damnable death reject. You’re the one who put Meiga Itogami up to this.”

“Heh...ha! ...Know the humiliation of having your legitimate lands usurped, descendants of Cain—!”

Leaving those words behind, a declaration of war akin to a curse, the girl vanished from sight.

The ferociously jumbled sounds grew distant, and the monitor’s image recovered. “Damned ghost,” Akishige grumbled, glaring at the monitor with an annoyed twist of his cheeks. The Priestess of Abel had jacked Akishige’s well-protected, top-secret line.

“Chairman, what should we—? At this rate...”

“Keep it together. Hurry and seize the operations unit in the City Administration Office. Search for the Priestess of Abel with all the Island Guard’s resources. Also, inform the commander of the SSG.”

After scolding the frightened researchers, Akishige resettled himself in his chair in front of the desk. Feeling the cold gaze of Shahryar Ren upon him, he suppressed his emotions as he wrung out his voice.

“—Kill Meiga Itogami.”

2

Meiga Itogami’s entire body was enshrouded by a malevolent, vermillion

radiance.

On the inside of the intricate particles of light, ancient magical characters were flashing in and out. Each and every one of those vermillion particles was probably its own magic circle imbued with powerful ritual energy. It was overwhelming magic unlike any Kojou had previously encountered. Furthermore, the density and radiance of the vermillion particles was only increasing as time went on.

And even more frightening than that, with so much magical power being emitted, the area around Meiga was teeming with serenity. He could not feel any surge of demonic energy, heat, recoil, or even an aura. The air was simply filled with overwhelming tranquility. Thanks to that, he could not see Meiga's limits. He felt the unease of staring straight down into a deep pit, the bottom nowhere to be seen.

"You said you'd...drag out Himeragi... No way I'm gonna let that happen...!" Kojou shouted with his dry, grating throat.

Triggered less by anger than by fear, Kojou unleashed his demonic energy without limit. With Yukina well on her way to angelification, there was no way he could let her fight Meiga. He would stop it...for sure. He would stop it at all costs.

That was just how dangerous, how unfathomable, Meiga was as he released that vermillion radiance. It was not reasoning or instinct that told Kojou this, but the blood of the Fourth Primogenitor.

"Wait, Kojou Akatsuki! Right now, he is—"

Seeing Kojou entering a combat posture, Natsuki gasped, her expression going hard. But Kojou had already finished ordering his Beast Vassal to attack. The scarlet bicorn unleashed a highly dense bullet of oscillation and raging winds.

"Al-Nasl Minium—!!"

"——"

Hmph, Meiga's silent smirk seemed to say. Raising his black spear, surrounded by vermillion particles, overhead, he took Kojou's Beast Vassal's attack—the

bullet of raging winds—head-on.

Before Meiga's eyes, the very air shimmered like a mirage, and then everything arising from the Beast Vassal's attack changed somehow. The attack by a Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor was unable to force even a single one of Meiga's bangs to move.

Kojou stared at the spectacle, mouth agape.

It was not so much that he was shaken, more that he was unable to comprehend what had just taken place. Even if Meiga's black staff had nullified the Beast Vassal's demonic energy, surely it would not have erased even the physical shock wave from the attack already unleashed.

And yet, Meiga remained enveloped by particles of light as he cruelly smiled. It was a gentle yet indifferent smiling face, one seemingly taking pity at the surprised Kojou and the others with him.

"So that concludes your efforts? Then I shall seize the initiative—High Priestess!"

With his right hand keeping his staff poised, Meiga raised his empty left hand aloft. The red particle he was gripping in his hand was an octahedron around the size of a bullet—and this changed into a mass imbued with the magical element of wind.

The next moment, this gleaming mass of light flew toward Kojou without a sound.

Literally transforming into bullets, they shot right at Kojou—dozens of them. Even with a vampire's reaction speeds, the sheer number of them was too great to evade.

"Shit...! C'mon over, Mesarthim Adamas!"

Largely on reflex, Kojou summoned a new Beast Vassal. What emerged was a giant bighorn sheep with immaculate diamond skin.

The countless gemstone crystals enveloping the Beast Vassal accumulated to form a stout shield in front of Kojou.

The true nature of Mesarthim Adamas was that of a divine diamond sheep

that was impervious to any attack. Those that would inflict wounds upon it had those wounds reflected upon them. The Beast Vassal symbolized the vampiric curse of immortality. But—

“What—?!”

The instant Meiga’s vermillion bullets touched it, Kojou’s absolutely impenetrable defensive wall was smashed to smithereens, as fragile as a wall of chocolate. It had not been bludgeoned down by overwhelming demonic power, nor had Kojou’s own demonic power been nullified; Meiga’s vermillion bullets simply made the gemstone wall vanish, as if it had never existed to begin with.

Then, as Kojou stood defenseless and still, the remaining bullets bore down upon him.

What blocked those bullets was an invisible bulwark created by the arc of a slash.

“Fall back, Kojou Akatsuki!”

The severed space created by Sayaka’s long sword swallowed the vermillion bullets. The pseudo-spatial slashing of Lustrous Scale, which did not come into direct contact with the enemy’s attack, had not been affected by those bullets. Apparently, contact with the target was the condition for the bullets’ ability to activate.

“Are you all right, Kojou Akatsuki?” Poised with her sword high, Sayaka shielded Kojou.

“Yeah, somehow. You saved my ass, Kirasaka. Thanks.” Kojou sighed in relief.

Perhaps she had not thought he would offer her gratitude so readily, for Sayaka was taken aback, cheeks red as her lips haltingly opened and closed.

Truly, had Sayaka not protected him, Kojou was certain he’d have been nailed by Meiga’s attack. Even if he was an immortal primogenitor, he didn’t know if even he could have survived being shot by those bullets.

“But what the heck’s with that power...? It instantly shot through my Beast Vassal’s defense, y’know?” Kojou uttered.

Meanwhile, Meiga leisurely approached. Without understanding the true

nature of his enemy's ability, Kojou could not carelessly launch any attacks. At this rate, it would just back him further into a corner.

It was Natsuki who replied to Kojou's question.

"That is The Cleansing."

As if they were dizzy, Kojou and Sayaka were enveloped by swaying air; the next instant, the pair had been shifted to the top of a building some forty to fifty meters away from Meiga. Natsuki had teleported them, putting distance between them and Meiga so that they might escape his next attack.

"The Cleansing...?"

After the sudden shift, Natsuki's unexpected words caused both Kojou and Sayaka to look back.

Of course, both were familiar with the word *Cleansing*. However, they thought that it referred to a much larger-scale historical incident, something more like a natural disaster.

Compared to that, the vermillion radiance controlled by Meiga Itogami seemed too...calm. They couldn't process it as anything but some kind of rare magic.

Yet, that calm, bizarre ability had completely sealed the power of a Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor.

"The forbidden magic created by Cain, the Sinful God, for slaying deities...", Natsuki explained quietly in a voice that betrayed a little bit of fear, "and the Forbidden Ritual that gave rise to the worst genocide in history—that is the truth behind that which we call The Cleansing. Though, this is secondhand knowledge from Gajou Akatsuki."

"Kojou Akatsuki's father...?" said Sayaka, swallowing her breath a little in surprise.

The hell is she talking about? Kojou grimaced. Kojou's dad, Gajou Akatsuki, was absolutely not respectable enough to deserve being called his *father*. "Shitty dad" was good enough. But setting that aside, he did claim archeology as his field of specialty, which would explain why he was familiar with legends

about The Cleansing.

“Kojou Akatsuki, absolutely do not approach Meiga Itogami. Even with your power, you cannot defeat him. He is not fending off your attacks. He is making them cease to exist.” Natsuki sounded unusually serious.

“So he’s nullifying the demonic energy? Like Aya Tokoyogi’s Black Bible...?” Kojou asked, bewildered.

“No.” Natsuki shook her head. “You are mistaken. Aya merely used the power of the Black Bible to mimic The Cleansing. Her self-satisfaction harbored that contradiction from the very beginning. After all, she used this world’s demonic energy to temporarily overwrite the world and create one where demonic energy did not exist. But even if you blot out a painting with ink, that does not make the painting underneath it vanish, does it?”

“W-well, yeah...”

Kojou vaguely nodded. Certainly, the world revision brought about by the Black Bible was a temporary phenomenon dependent on the lunar cycle and the position of the constellations. Kojou’s and the others’ supposedly erased demonic energy soon returned, and as a result, Aya Tokoyogi was defeated.

“But The Cleansing alters the world itself. For instance, even if you sliced up the painting or burned it, he could simply do away with the entire museum.”

Natsuki’s words sounded very casual, but that made them feel all the more trustworthy.

“Don’t tell me...that ruin of Nod that Glenda and I saw was...”

“Perhaps it was a world that perished, destroyed in Cain’s wake.”

Kojou’s murmur brought a nod from Natsuki. It was a destroyed, uninhabited ruin paired with a world buried in nothingness. The world of Nod that Kojou had witnessed might well have been a vestige of The Cleansing. Left to rage unchecked, the power of The Cleansing could wipe an entire world away.

“But can a human being actually use magic that can reshape the world?” It was a simple question that had just occurred to Kojou.

If the ability of The Cleansing was to alter the world itself, the volume of

information plainly exceeded that which an individual person could control. He didn't think such attacks could be fired blindly without a complicated magical ceremony behind it.

Natsuki mixed a nod with a sigh.

"Of course a person cannot handle it. That is why he requires the altar known as Itogami Island, and the so-called Priestess of Cain. These constitute a source for magical energy and a device for magical calculations, respectively—"

Meiga Itogami launched a fresh attack before she could finish those words.

Controlling the vermillion particles, Meiga created a hexagon the size of a basketball out of thin air. Meiga fired this polygon, which bore the magical meaning of the element of earth, like a cannonball toward the building where Kojou and the others were located.

With a ferocious collision, the cannonball of light particles scattered, and the entire building was dyed vermillion. It was the next moment when the building at Kojou and company's feet suddenly began to crumble and collapse.

In the blink of an eye, the building's structure had been transformed into a mass of salt. Stark-white salt crystals scattered about as the huge building fell.

"That said, it would appear this small amount seems to be the limit of the power he can draw..."

Teleporting them to the ground once more, Natsuki spoke the words like this was someone else's problem.

"Gwoah?!"

"Small amount...?! That's plenty dangerous enough, if you ask me...!"

Kojou was hurled onto the hard, concrete surface. Sayaka grabbed hold of the hem of her skirt as she fell on top of Kojou. *Koff!* went Kojou, his breath caught, as Natsuki coldly looked back at them and said:

"Be careful. He's lobbing attacks that break the rules of magic as well as the laws of physics."

"'Be careful,' she says. How the hell are you supposed to watch out for something like—?"

Stopping his sentence partway, Kojou lifted his face, whereupon vermillion bullets sailing through the air were reflected in his eyes. Scarlet particles scattered about as they poured down upon him.

“Urk...! Lustrous Scale—!”

Leaping forth, Sayaka used a flash of her long sword to create a pseudo-spatial severing wall. It had already been proven that such an invisible bulwark could fend off even Meiga’s bullets. This time, however...

“Eh?!”

As if having anticipated Sayaka’s action, the bullets changed course. The vermillion bullets each traced curves that ignored the laws of physics, attacking Sayaka from behind.

The pseudo-spatial severing of Sayaka’s long sword was powerful, but it harbored the weakness of only being deployable in a single direction. Having already deployed the bulwark in front of her, Sayaka could not defend against attacks from behind.

“Kirasaka!”

Kojou, standing up after a delay, called out the immobile Sayaka’s name. Charging in from the side, he shielded Sayaka by pushing her out of the way. The vermillion bullets mercilessly assaulted Kojou’s entire body. His right leg and flank, his shoulder and back—he was shot in four different places, helplessly tumbling to the ground.

“No way! Kojou Akatsuki?!”

Realizing that Kojou had saved her, Sayaka shrieked when she also discovered that Kojou was covered in blood. With his barely mobile left leg supporting the weight of his body, Kojou rose to his feet.

“I’m all right. It’s just a scratch... Something like this’ll...heal soon enough...”

“Idiot! If his attacks can nullify your Beast Vassals, they might be able to nullify vampiric healing abilities, too!”

“Looks...like you’re right...”

Kojou himself was aware of the large volume of blood spilling out of his body.

There was no sign of the life force peculiar to demons or the activation of his healing ability. The bullets had quietly robbed him of his supernatural power.

Salt crystals dancing upward from the collapse of the building covered Kojou and the others' fields of vision like dust. On the other side of that hazy mist, Meiga appeared, enshrouded by vermillion radiance.

"Now, then... Have you finally decided to summon Yukina Himeragi here?"

Toying with a vermillion bullet in the palm of his hand, Meiga inquired in a gentle fashion.

The words made Sayaka fly into a rage. Meiga's attitude, and his obsession with Yukina, really rubbed her the wrong way.

"Like hell I will! It's ten years too soon for the likes of you to speak Yukina's name!"

"Kirasaka, quit it—!"

Before Kojou could stop her, Sayaka turned her long sword over, slicing toward Meiga with it.

Meiga's vermillion bullet shot out. Tracing a complicated arc, it was an octagonal mass flying at high speed.

Sayaka just barely lured it in and swatted it down with Lustrous Scale. This feat of supreme skill, worthy of being called a work of God, brought an approving smile over Meiga.

"Pseudo-spatial severing, is it...? As expected of a Shamanic War Dancer. What fine skill. However, you have wandered too close—"

"Eh...?"

As Meiga levied his sarcasm, Sayaka's combat pose suddenly crumbled. Strength drained from her entire body, leaving her to wobble and crumple on the spot. Even so, Sayaka managed to rise up again, but all she could manage was a stagger; she could not stand upright. Her semicircular canals had been thrown awry, and her eyes were not focused on the same spot.

"Don't tell me...you poisoned the air..."

Sayaka let out an anguished groan. The radiance of The Cleansing, the vermillion particles around Meiga, freely altered the very world. If it had enough power to turn an entire building into a pillar of salt, surely turning the air into a poisonous gas would be trivial.

“If Yukina Himeragi hears your screams, she’ll come running, right...?”

As Sayaka fell to her knees, Meiga looked down at her as he thrust his black spear without warning. The warped spear was aimed at Sayaka’s right shoulder. He surely meant not to finish her off in one blow, but to rob her limbs of freedom and prolong her suffering.

“—!”

Even as Sayaka’s face contorted with fear, she levied an obstinate glare at Meiga.

“Meiga Itogami! You little...!”

Kojou dragged his injured body along as he rose to his feet and rushed at Meiga, fist drawn back. Immediately behind Kojou, the heavy *thunk* of a round being loaded reverberated.

“Sir Boyfriend, get thyself down!”

What he heard was Lydianne’s voice, synthesized to sound deep and threatening. Lifting its ritual magic camouflage, her robot tank came into view, unloading every weapon at its disposal.

These included large-caliber antipersonnel machine guns in the legs, micro-missiles hailing from the back, and stun grenades and wireless Tasers. The main gun had fired a fragmentation round for riot suppression. Meiga’s black spear could not block solid attacks such as these.

Meiga controlled his vermillion particles to deploy a bulwark around himself. This bulwark, in the shape of a dodecagon, halted Lydianne’s cannon fire.

“An anti-demon robot tank... I see. Did you think that physical attacks not reliant upon magic could defy the world-altering power of The Cleansing? How very futile—,” Meiga murmured with scorn.

Lydianne continued firing without pause, but none of her attacks reached

Meiga. Every single one bounced off the vermillion wall surrounding him.

With the dodecagon-shaped wall still deployed, Meiga created new bullets, octagonal ones around the size of hand grenades. If those bullets could turn a building into a pillar of salt, they would surely neutralize the armor of Lydianne's tank with ease. But before he could unleash his bullets, the air ripped with a heavy *clang*.

"No, it is not futile at all—"

"What?!"

With a great roar, a golden chain reaching tens of meters in length collided with Meiga's wall. The apparition of an enormous knight emerged at Natsuki's back, swinging the golden chain like a whip. This was Natsuki's contracted demonic vassal—the Guardian of the Witch of the Void.

Meiga, still fending off Lydianne's bullet hail, could not evade that attack. Sustaining the collision from an unanticipated direction, Meiga and the wall were both sent flying.

"Kirasaka, you all right?"

During that time, Kojou picked up the fallen Sayaka. Hovering around her was a strange, powerful scent that made his nose throb. The poisonous gas Meiga had created had yet to fully dissipate.

"Lydianne, take care of Sayaka!"

"Understood!"

Carrying the immobile Sayaka in a sub-arm, Lydianne's tank retreated. Thanks to the sustained volley, the robot tank was pretty low on ammo. She'd no doubt judged that continued combat would prove difficult.

"And you, Sir Boyfriend?"

"I'm fine. I'll back Natsuki up. You two fall back to somewhere safe!"

Speaking those last words to Lydianne, Kojou wobbled as he walked forward.

Natsuki continued her attacks, but the tide of battle had already turned. The might of her magical gear, Dromi, was formidable, but it could not break

Meiga's wall. On the other side of the coin, Natsuki seemed to be barely evading Meiga's vermillion bullets through the use of teleportation.

Even so, Natsuki's expression remained composed.

"Kojou Akatsuki—beneath."

Natsuki was using some manner of magic to speak directly into Kojou's ears.

"Beneath...?"

Perplexed, Kojou shifted his gaze to his own feet. The only thing there was a concrete surface, with not the slightest thing unusual about it. This was the exterior event space on Stratum Three of Keystone Gate. Beneath it was the unmanned parking space and a supply warehouse. And beyond that—

"So that's it! C'mon over, Natra Cinereus!"

Gathering his remaining demonic energy, Kojou summoned a new Beast Vassal: an illusory, shelled beast enveloped by thick, silver mist. Its giant forelegs crashed into the plaza, transforming the concrete surface into mist.

The area under his feet literally dissipated, and Kojou's body tumbled beneath the ground's surface. What he saw beneath him was an underground chamber encased by a metallic barrier wall—Keystone Gate's Stratum Zero. In that chamber, filled to the brim with seawater, an object floated that had not previously been present.

It was a streamlined vessel encased in a metallic, ultramarine-colored shell—the submarine called Cain's Coffin.

"So that was your aim, Witch of the Void... It would seem you are indeed my most difficult foe!"

Scattering scarlet radiance all about, Meiga leaped down to chase after Kojou.

If Kojou and the others took back Asagi, confined inside the sub, Meiga would lose the power of The Cleansing. There was no mistaking that he acted out of fear of that very possibility. So Asagi really was held captive inside the Coffin.

"So this is Cain's Coffin...? Where's the entrance—?! There—!"

Bounding upon the submarine's hull, Kojou ran toward the hatch. Seeing this,

Natsuki gasped, her expression hardening.

“Wait, Kojou Akatsuki! Do not approach carelessly—!”

“Huh...?”

Having touched the submarine’s hatch, Kojou was suddenly enveloped in glowing red miasma. He let out a voiceless scream at the ferocious pain piercing his entire body. A cube-shaped cage had surrounded his body. This polygon, bearing the element of fire, transformed into a burning hell to torment Kojou. Foreseeing Kojou’s action, Meiga Itogami had laid a trap beforehand.

“Shit—! C’mon over, Al-Meissa Mercury!”

In terrible pain, Kojou found a way to breathe as he summoned a Beast Vassal. This was Beast Vassal Number Three of the Fourth Primogenitor—the twin-headed, quicksilver-scaled dragon bearing the ability to gouge holes out of space itself. He tried to employ that ability to destroy Meiga’s trap.

But even the maws of the Dimension Eater Beast Vassal could not break the fiery cubic cage. Bathed in a backwash of vermillion particles, it was Kojou’s Beast Vassal that took the brunt instead.

“Damn...iiit....!”

Seemingly depleted of strength, Kojou collapsed on the spot. He had insufficient demonic energy with which to summon a new Beast Vassal. He had suffered too much damage from Meiga’s attacks.

“And so the first one falls—”

Eyes on the immobile Kojou, Meiga fired off new bullets. These were cubic bullets bearing the element of fire. He fired nearly twenty simultaneously. These, he launched, ready to shoot right through the fiery cage, and Kojou with it—

“——Snowdrift Wolf!”

It was a small girl fluttering down from the heavens who knocked them down. Then she swung, and a dazzling silver light lashed out.

The purging spear able to pierce any barrier pulverized the fiery cage that had caught Kojou. Then, still wielding her silver spear, she landed at Kojou's side without a sound.

Impeded by the silver spear, the scarlet bullets shot out by Meiga never reached Kojou's body. The world-altering power of The Cleansing and the radiance of the Divine Oscillation Effect had canceled each other out.

"Are you all right, senpai?"



When Yukina peered at him out of concern, Kojou stared back in abject shock. He was too surprised and flustered for words. After repeated, ferocious coughs, he finally managed to get a raspy voice out.

“Himeragi?! The hell are you doing here—?!”

Didn’t she know that if she kept using Snowdrift Wolf, she would vanish?

Why hadn’t Yukari Endou stopped her—?

Kojou harbored those various questions, but sudden, crude, and loud laughter erased them from his mind.

“Ha-ha! ...Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! For you to seek me out... Let me show you my appreciation, Yukina Himeragi. Thanks to you, I have been spared a considerable waste of time... Heh-heh!”

A crazed smile came over Meiga as he shouted, almost like he was a different person than his usual, composed self. As if to defy his bloodlust-filled gaze, Yukina turned her silver spear toward him.

“Himeragi, watch out. This guy’s attacks rewrite the world’s rules. Even your spear might not be able to defend against it...!”

“...Yes. I understand.”

To Kojou’s words, and the bitter warning they formed, Yukina slowly nodded. For a single instant, she looked back at Kojou with a smile; then she closed her eyes, as if blowing something aside.

“Even so—!”

Yukina’s entire body was imbued with a pale radiance. Characters were traced in midair, complicated magical symbols identical to the ones emerging upon Snowdrift Wolf’s surface. The symbols adopted the form of wings, spreading forth from Yukina’s back.

“Himeragi...!”

The vast spiritual energy Yukina was giving off pricked and burned Kojou’s skin. He knew that sensation. It was damage from being bathed in high-density divine essence, as he had been when he had fought the Faux-Angel Kanon

Kanase once long ago.

“This divine essence... I see, so that is it...!”

As Meiga continued to laugh, a dark glint of hatred rested in his eyes. All around him, he created vermillion bullets beyond all counting. These he fired in a single volley, bearing down on Yukina from all directions.

“I will never accept...you stepping into the realm of Touka... This shall not be... For Touka to be used up and cast aside...for the sake of the successor to Snowdrift Wolf—as if I could ever accept that?!”

“Urk...?!”

The scarlet bullets pressed down upon Yukina’s wings, corroding them. The Cleansing under Meiga’s control was created as a god-killing, Forbidden Ritual. Even a complete Faux-Angel could not defend against the attack. The only reason Yukina could barely hold out was because Meiga’s power was as yet incomplete.

“Ms. Minamiya! Rescue Aiba while you still can—!” Yukina shouted to Natsuki. She declared that she could withstand the attacks.

“Do not give orders to me, Sword Shaman,” Natsuki sourly muttered as she landed at Kojou’s side. “This one says this, that one says that.”

Due to Yukina, Meiga’s trap laid upon the submarine’s hatch had already been disarmed. The Coffin’s interior barrier was still active, so she could not teleport in, but it was surely possible to open the hatch and enter that way.

Natsuki slightly furrowed her brows, clenching her closed fan as her movements came to a halt.

She was staring at the strange, faintly glimmering silhouette floating amid the darkness. Light particles of The Cleansing accumulated, gradually transforming into the form of a girl—unsightly yet beautiful with harsh scars.

“Thou shalt not...!”

The translucent, glimmering, ghostlike girl launched bullets toward Natsuki like rain. They were bullets formed of the same radiance as The Cleansing that Meiga controlled.

“What’s...with that girl...?!”

Launched at point-blank range, the girl’s attack gave Natsuki no chance to evade. Bathed in countless bullets from close range, Natsuki’s small body was blown away. Fragments of her broken folding fan scattered downward; torn pieces of her extravagant dress danced in the sky.

“Natsuki—?!”

Kojou stared blankly, shouting as Natsuki was struck down.

“Ha-ha!” Meiga Itogami sounded delighted. “I thank you, High Priestess—”

As he spoke his thanks to the ghostly girl, Meiga lashed out with his black spear. Scattering from its tips was Fangzahn’s black spiritual energy—nullifying aurora.

“Ah—”

Slashed and rent by the dark-colored aurora, Yukina’s wings vanished. Vermillion bullets poured like rain. The bullets were too numerous for her Snowdrift Wolf to intercept. Having lost the blessing of divine essence, she was at a disadvantage, crushed by the greater number of cards in Meiga’s hand.

“Shit! C’mon over, Sadalmelik—”

Struck by a sense of urgency, Kojou tried to summon a fresh Beast Vassal, but Meiga reacted swiftly.

“Out of my way!”

Meiga fired at Kojou, who was helpless just prior to the summoning. Supernatural power—robbing bullets pierced Kojou through his left shoulder and abdomen.

“Senpai—?!”

For a moment, the sight of blood spurting from Kojou as he fell distracted Yukina; it was a fatal opening. With the dark membrane shredding the divine essence emanating from Yukina, Meiga slammed the black spear home.

“It’s over, Yukina Himeragi!”

With her spiritual energy negated, Yukina could not protect herself against

the jiangshi's strength. Meiga's black spear knocked Snowdrift Wolf away, and with Yukina's guard broken, he thrust the black spear's opposing tip in pursuit of her wide-open throat.

"No, not yet—"

That instant, sound vanished from the world. It was a momentary tranquility, as if time itself had gone silent.

Together with a ferocious *noise*, that pure-white tranquility was shot to pieces; the next instant, Meiga sailed backward as if his body had bounced off something. Even Yukina, bearing the ability to peer into the future, could not tell what had happened in that moment. Meiga had been supposedly attacking Yukina when, at some point, his body had been riddled with nine bullets.

"The absolute right of initiative...?!"

Meiga slowly rose to his feet despite suffering damage that would have instantly killed any normal person. What trickled from his lips was fresh yet stagnant blood...and the low reverberation of invective.

"So you were alive, Paper Noise...!!"

Red particles spewed from Meiga's entire body. A vast number of bullets of light, their number incomparable to what had come before, scattered all around the area in a burst of anger. He was trying to flush out the unseen Paper Noise with an indiscriminate attack.

The submarine base of Stratum Zero was filled with a firestorm, with broken fragments of the metal barrier wall blowing around like blades. However, there was no sense of him having felled his opponent.

"So she ran away."

Waiting for the smoke screen to subside, Meiga quietly sighed.

The heavily wounded Kojou Akatsuki and Yukina Himeragi had vanished from sight. That was probably Natsuki Minamiya's doing. She used a teleport to whisk them away during the time Meiga's attention had been occupied with Paper Noise.

"Troublesome, but it is fine. There is one additional person who must be

destroyed—”

Speaking these words, Meiga shifted his eyes overhead. Through the smoke screen that had yet to dissipate, an enormous, imposing building came into view.

The girl covered with wounds cackled as she hovered behind Meiga.

A dark, twisted smile rose upon her face, the sort known only to those utterly consumed by revenge.

4

Hurled violently against a hard surface, Kojou let out a brief yelp.

It was a tiny park alongside a waterway. On the opposing shore, he could see Keystone Gate spewing black smoke.

Judging from the scenery around him, he was probably on the southern bank of Island North. It was a good couple of kilometers from there to Keystone Gate.

“It seems you are alive somehow, Kojou Akatsuki.”

Natsuki spoke haughtily as she looked down on Kojou, who was lying faceup. It was indeed she who had brought Kojou out just before Meiga had begun his indiscriminate attack.

“Yeah, somehow.”

Kojou weakly murmured as he slowly got his blood-soaked body into a seated position. The wounds from where Meiga’s bullets had shot through him ran far deeper than he had imagined. Thanks to that, recovery was strangely slow, even with a vampire’s regenerative ability. The powers of The Cleansing really had dampened Kojou’s abilities.

And yet, the overwhelming demonic power of the Fourth Primogenitor was defying the effect of The Cleansing through sheer force, but he had no idea how long he could hold out if he took any more of those bullets. Having come in contact with the supposed forbidden god-killing magic, all that appeared to be

no exaggeration.

“You all right, Himeragi?”

Kojou shifted his gaze to Yukina as she lent him a shoulder of support. From what he could see, Yukina bore no external wounds, but even at a glance, it was all too clear she was exhausted. There was no mistaking it: This was an effect of using divine essence during her fight with Meiga. However, as if to conceal that, Yukina gave him a cheery smile.

“Yes, I am fine. However, the one who aided us in the end—”

“Paper Noise...I presume. I would like to think she escaped on her own power, but...,” Natsuki replied in Kojou’s place. Her voice sounded less resilient than its normal, cruel tone. It felt as if she was confessing *I couldn’t save her*.

It was then that Kojou finally remembered that she was wounded.

“Natsuki... Those wounds...”

“Not a problem. This body is nothing but a vessel, after all,” Natsuki said with a slow shake of her head.

In a certain sense, Natsuki’s wounds were more horrid than Kojou’s. For all the lack of identifiable bleeding, her damage ran from the rips in her dress to the deep cracks he could see gouged into her flesh and the way her left arm dangled limply. The wounds were from when the mysterious girl—whose appearance rivaled that of a bloodied apparition—had shot her.

“However, it is true that even I cannot employ my full power like this. Damn that Priestess of Abel, she got me good...”

Natsuki’s lips curled in visible displeasure as she suppressed the awkward movements of her left arm.

Natsuki’s real flesh-and-blood body continued to sleep within the other world known as the Prison Barrier. Natsuki’s body in the real world was a doll—a clone she controlled via magic.

Even though it was a magically created clone, destroying it left Natsuki with no way to move around the real world. At the very least, the damage her clone body had sustained robbed Natsuki of some of her combat capabilities.

Naturally, even she would be reluctant to engage in combat with Meiga in her current condition.

All the same, there was no way Kojou could fault Natsuki; the sudden appearance of the ghostly girl had been something completely beyond their capacity to predict.

“That Priestess of A... That ghostlike girl. What is she?” he asked.

Natsuki gave a cold laugh. “*Ghost* is an oddly apt description. That girl is a survivor of The Cleansing of old. Though, since her body has long since perished, it sounds odd to describe her as a survivor.”

“Meaning she is a...vestigial consciousness?”

Yukina narrowed her eyes in apparent surprise. Natsuki nodded a little.

“Properly speaking, a corpse infused with a vestigial consciousness. There was a report that she had been smuggled into Itogami Island, and the Attack Mage Branch was dispatched in that direction, but Meiga Itogami’s backers seem to have put a stop to it.”

“Then the one controlling The Cleansing at this moment is...”

“Right. It is that woman, not Asagi Aiba. If Asagi, the true Priestess of Cain, had been handling the calculations, The Cleansing would not have ended at such a meager scale.”

“I think this meager scale was plenty dangerous enough...”

Kojou set his cheek on his palm as he let out a sigh. The world-altering power of The Cleansing that Meiga controlled was far too much for a single individual to possess. Changing a building into a pillar of salt, nullifying the Beast Vassals of the World’s Mightiest Vampire—it deserved the off-the-wall name of Forbidden Ritual.

However, if Natsuki’s words were true, the real Cleansing must have had enormous influence, dwarfing what he had faced. And if that was so, it was an ability frightening enough that it could destroy Itogami Island—or the world, for that matter; enough to think that those Nalakuvera and Wiseman’s Blood were little kids in comparison.

“That woman, who once lost her life from being enveloped in The Cleansing, bears a strong power to resist alterations to the world,” Natsuki explained. “It is like developing an immunity to a transmissible disease. That is why, even though she is not the proper Priestess of Cain, she is somehow able to control The Cleansing.”

“So that’s why you call her the Priestess of Abel, huh...?” Kojou did not conceal his irritation. “In the end, what is The Cleansing anyway? I dunno about this Senra Itogami guy, but why’d he wanna bring something like that back?”

“If you wish to know about The Cleansing, why not ask an expert in the field?” As she glared at Kojou, Natsuki closed one eye and shot him a mischievous-looking smile.

From out of thin air, she took out what looked like a plain cell phone issued by the Attack Mage Branch. Scrolling through her address book, she found a number and called it.

“Expert?”

Who? Kojou tilted his head, looking to Yukina for clarity. She, too, seemed perplexed as she shook her head.

Meanwhile, the other party had apparently answered Natsuki’s call. She wore an especially emotionless look as she said, “It is I, grave robber.”

Speaking in an unsociable voice, Natsuki switched the call to speakerphone.

Coursing over the phone was the especially clear voice of a man all too familiar to Kojou.

“Ahhh? Oh, it’s you, li’l Teach. Sowwy, but Nagisa’s coming to visit me here in the hospital. If I’m making nice with women other than my bride, she’s gonna chew me out again, so I’m hangin’ up.”

Kojou’s father—Gajou Akatsuki—was rambling in his usual, shady tone.

Why the heck does Natsuki know Gajou? thought Kojou, seriously thrown for a loop. The unexpected confirmation that Nagisa was all right was the only good thing Kojou could see coming out of it. Apparently, Gajou had yet to hear anything about the unrest at Keystone Gate.

“I have no intention whatsoever of making nice with you. I am merely calling to ask a question.”

Bluntly ignoring the bewildered Kojou, Natsuki continued her conversation with Gajou.

“*Question?*” Gajou replied, making no effort to conceal his displeasure.

Are you really okay with giving attitude to Natsuki Minamiya, the Witch of the Void? thought Kojou, seriously concerned for his father’s well-being for once.

“What is The Cleansing? For what purpose was it instigated?”

In front of Kojou, by then quite on edge, Natsuki repeated the question with far higher pressure than he had.

On the other end of the line, Gajou unleashed a conspicuous sigh. “*What, that? And here I was sure you were gonna ask me what kind of girls I prefer.*”

“Enough nonsense. Answer me.”

When Natsuki threatened him over the phone, Kojou practically felt Gajou’s shoulders sink.

Then his voice abruptly changed. It was sober, serious—one Kojou had never heard before.

“—*Legends, you see, might look like mere fabrications, but they often reflect history at the time to a surprising degree. The legend of a hero dispatching a dragon might conceal behind it a king who prevented a river flood with riparian works. A legend about obtaining a holy sword might be an allusion for the spread of metallurgy.*”

“.....”

To some degree, Natsuki had apparently expected Gajou’s explanation. She nodded but once before instantly asking a question in return.

“Then what does The Cleansing...? What does Cain, the Sinful God, allude to?”

“*Well, that’s a pretty simple story: a great genocide of demons at the hands of humanity.*”

“You are saying that humankind slaughtered demons?” Natsuki repeated for

confirmation.

Gajou tossed a laugh as he said, *“Well, that’s how it turned out from our perspective. But I’m pretty sure they didn’t call ’em demons at the time.”*

“Then what were they called?”

“Devas—alternatively, ancient superhumans—or perhaps gods.”

“Gods...?”

Kojou and Yukina listened with bated breath as Natsuki and Gajou continued to converse.

They both knew about a race referred to as ancient superhumans. It was they who had created various ancient weapons like the Nalakuvera and who had sealed the twelfth Kaleid Blood—Aurora—in a ruin. Indeed, they had fought a sorcerous criminal who claimed to be descended from the Devas.

But that they and demons were one and the same—this was complete news to them. It was not something easily believed.

“You are saying demons are, in truth, gods?”

“The folks that win a war declare the gods of the defeated nation to be demons and monsters. That’s the cliché play, made by the ruling side all around the world, ain’t it?”

“This would not be a story warmly welcomed by mankind.”

“Well, of course not. There’s no way in hell the scholastic world would recognize a thesis like this. So I don’t mind if you pass off all the stuff I said just now as my own personal delusion.”

“I do not care about that. Continue.”

Natsuki prodded him to keep going.

“Li’l Teach is so inquisitive.” Gajou laughed. *“...The individual we call Cain was also once part of the people known as gods, but for whatever reason, he must have been exiled from this world. Speaking from my experience, it’d be trouble relating to money or women,”* said Gajou in a dead-serious voice.

“Then, in the world Cain was exiled to, he met humankind. Twisted as he

might be, he was still a god. Taming a powerless humankind must've been child's play. Through the worship of the people, Cain turned into a real god. So having become the ruler of this other world, whaddaya think Cain's next desire was?"

"To return to this world—and exact his revenge on the gods that exiled him," Natsuki replied without hesitation.

"Right answer. But Cain alone couldn't win against the gods. That said, humankind was way too powerless to fight the gods themselves. It was then that Cain gave humanity the knowledge and the tools to fight against the gods. One was magic. And the other—"

"The sorcerous devices of The Cleansing."

"That's li'l Teach for you. Quick study." Gajou raised his voice in what seemed to be genuine admiration. "So for those reasons, he got plenty of troops under him, but the gods' power was overwhelmingly vast. Humankind had no chance against them in a straight-up fight. So Cain had this thought—humankind cannot kill a god. If that is an iron rule of the world, then just rewrite the rule."

"And that is The Cleansing's purpose, then?" Natsuki snorted and grinned. It sort of came off as annoyed and frigid, though.

"That's right. Through the ultimate Forbidden Ritual that altered the world, Cain changed the very nature of the gods. The gods were changed into demons. Humankind cannot kill a god. But if they're facing demons, that's a different story."

"And as a result, a great genocide was instigated?"

"I told you, this is all my personal delusion. It's not like anyone's gonna accept that humans were the usurpers. Besides, there's no proof whatsoever that the folks they called gods were benign beings of some sort. Plus, if you told demon folks that they're descended from ancient superhumans, ain't like they're gonna accept that, either," Gajou said in jest. Surprisingly, Natsuki did not refute him in any way.

"If this story is the truth, then Cain is indeed the First Sinner, and so, too, the Father of all demons." Natsuki's face twisted into a complex expression of

sympathy and resignation.

"I suppose so," Gajou bluntly replied.

It was Kojou who forced his way into the adults' conversation. Natsuki bristled as Kojou half stole the cell phone right out of her hand.

"Hold on. I get why the first Cleansing happened. But what gives with the folks trying to re-create that thing now? No one needs a genocide anymore, dammit!"

"Ah? The hell?"

Gajou raised an annoyed voice at the sudden intrusion of Kojou's question.

"Not that I care, but someone there just asked a really stupid question. The whole world's full of people who'd love to get their hands on the power of The Cleansing. If there were no more demons, they could help themselves to the dominions' natural resources. Even without fighting a natural war, having a weapon that powerful in their grip would make one hell of a bargaining chip."

Kojou groaned, his words caught in his throat. It hurt to admit it, but Gajou was right.

"So how do you stop The Cleansing?"

"Whaaat?"

"There's obviously a way to stop it after it's begun. Demons weren't exterminated, and humanity doesn't rule over them, so if there wasn't a way, none of this makes any sense. The one who got destroyed was Cain, dammit!"

"I don't know what idiot's talking, but that's one stupid, circular question you asked there. I'd like to give your father a piece of my mind," Gajou grumbled, really throwing Kojou for an emotional loop. *"Isn't it obvious? Cain was destroyed because someone killed his ass."*

"Killed...?"

As Kojou murmured in astonishment, Gajou stated toward him in a jovial tone that seemed to see through everything:

"To kill Cain, the one surviving god unaffected by The Cleansing, the folks once

known as the Devas built a weapon for killing a god. That's what destroyed Cain and ended The Cleansing. That was the world's mightiest artificial vampire—some idiot they called the Fourth Primogenitor or something."

5

Still gripping Natsuki's cell phone, Kojou was frozen and silent for a while. His head had gone blank, unable to think of anything. Gajou's words were so earth-shattering, he couldn't swallow them properly.

And so Kojou remained until his ears heard a boisterous voice in an affectation from a period drama.

"Sir Boyfriend! Art thou in good health?!"

A red robot tank approached, parting the park's foliage by force. The shell-like cockpit hatch opened, and Lydianne poked her head out.

"Oh my? What dost this atmosphere portend?"

Noticing that Kojou was out of his right mind, the visibly curious Lydianne posed that question.

Kojou, roughly pulling on his cheek to drag him back to his senses, said, "Uh... Mmm, don't worry about it. More importantly, is Kirasaka all right?"

"Lady Shamanic War Dancer...? That is, ah... I am uncertain as to whether I can classify her as 'all right'..."

"Huh?"

As Kojou knit his brows in visible concern, the stopped robot tank lowered itself flat on the ground. Sayaka Kirasaka half tumbled her way down from its back.

When she turned her hollow, unfocused eyes toward Kojou, a wobbly, defenseless smile came over her as she said:

"Ah... Kojou Akatsuki...!"

Speaking those words with a rather sexy expression, Sayaka went to embrace Kojou. Her completely unanticipated action made Kojou's entire body go rigid.

“K-Kirasaka...?”

“Geez, where did you go off to, leaving me alone like that?! I was worried about you! Yukina might disappear on me, so if something happened to you, too, I... I’d... Uh... Waaah...”

Pounding Kojou’s chest again and again, Sayaka suddenly began to break into tears. With half-lidded eyes, Natsuki stared at the sight of a Shamanic War Dancer of the Lion King Agency in such a state with a look of scorn. Yukina could only do the same.

When Kojou looked harder, Sayaka’s cheeks were faintly red and flushed, and as she clung to him, her entire body felt oddly soft against him. There was a sweet scent like that of ripened fruit wafting up from her whole body.

“Ugh,” Kojou groaned, his breath stopping when he realized the nature of that aroma. “...The hell? ...You smell like booze...”

“’Tis the work of Meiga Itogami. Somehow, that man hath altered the content of the air to create ether alcohol—”

Lydianne mixed a sigh into her words as she slowly shook her head.

“Alcohol? So that wasn’t poison, then...”

Kojou covered his eyes in annoyance when he recalled the action Meiga had taken to drive Sayaka off. Thinking about it calmly, at the time, Sayaka had been heading in to slice Meiga at point-blank range. There was no way he could have transformed the air around him into lethal poison gas under that circumstance, for even if he was an immortal jiangshi, the risk was just too great.

“Even alcohol can slay a person if consumed in sufficiently large quantities. In either case, Lady Shamanic War Dancer hath been in this state ever since.”

Lydianne made the statement in a tired tone, sounding oddly well versed about the subject. Meanwhile, Sayaka glommed onto Yukina, then standing beside Kojou, snugly pressing her breasts against Yukina’s cheek.

“Yukinaaaa...”

“S-Sayaka?”

“Noooo... Don’t disappear, Yukina, don’t leave meeee...”

“S-Sayaka, please calm down... Wait a— S-Sayaka?! Where are you touching me...?”

Unable to shove the girl away, Yukina seemed quite conflicted as Sayaka stroked her back. During that time, Sayaka embraced Yukina’s hips and blatantly fondled her breasts, absorbed in her sexual harassment.

Kojou gazed in astonishment at the sight and said, “Natsuki, can you, um, do something about this?”

“Leave her be. Even if I force her back to her senses with magic, she’ll be too hungover to fight for a few days. More importantly, Tanker—is that tank still usable?”

“Lady Instructor? What dost thou have in mind?” Lydianne blinked her eyes a few times.

“In total, there are five supercomputers that control Itogami Island. If we could sever one part of the network, Meiga Itogami’s power should diminish proportionately. After all, he must borrow the power of Itogami Island itself to control The Cleansing.”

“Hmm... There dost be merit in the attempt. Though it is most difficult for me to invade the Five Elements alone; should I borrow the power of Lady Empress, then perhaps...? However, for that, a route of contact with Lady Empress inside the Coffin becomes necessary.” Despite her words, Lydianne’s voice sounded innocent and well suited to her age.

Each of the vermillion bullets under Meiga’s control was a single, independent, and powerful magical formula. Vast computational ability surpassing human limits was necessary to employ magic of that extent.

Meiga was acting as the agent of Itogami Island’s main supercomputers, dubbed the Five Elements. In other words, a reduction in the Five Elements’ capability meant that The Cleansing would be weakened.

“Not a problem. Meiga Itogami activating The Cleansing and the Priestess of Abel assisting him are probably circumstances not accounted for in the *mastermind’s* actual plans. That is where we shall find our opening. Though, Meiga Itogami surely understands as much.”

“Understoodeth. I shall provide what meager support of which I am capable.”

With that strong declaration, Lydianne rebooted her robot tank. Natsuki gracefully climbed atop it.

“Natsuki. What should we do?”

Kojou asked as he dragged along his wounded leg and rose to his feet. As he did so, Natsuki shot him a glance, her long black hair swaying as she turned around, slamming a spectacular spinning kick into Kojou’s face.

The injured Kojou, unable to withstand the blow, was pathetically sent flying, rolling until he was faceup.

“Gu...ah...?! Hey, what the hell?! What was that for...?!”

“Yukina Himeragi. You get the drunk and the death reject off the island. At this hour, there should be a high-speed ship you can use to get to the mainland.”

“...Leave the island? Are you telling us to flee?” Yukina inquired in surprise.

The little witch looked down at the fallen Kojou with an emotionless gaze as she said, “You heard that phone call earlier, did you not? If The Cleansing activates in its completed form, he will be the only chance of stopping it, so make sure to protect this idiot.”

“Wait, Natsuki! I can still fight—”

“Let’s go, Tanker.”

“Sir Boyfriend, I prayeth for your fortunes in battle. Farewell!”

“Natsuki! Lydianne...!”

Ignoring the desperate Kojou as he rose to his feet, the tank Natsuki rode rolled out. Completely left behind, Kojou remained on his knees, watching as the girls receded into the distance when:

“What are you crying about, Kojou Akatsuki?!”

Kojou remained like that when Sayaka, still inebriated, slammed a karate chop into his back. Unable to endure the pain on top of the wounds where Meiga had shot him, Kojou was teary-eyed as he yelled, “Oh, shaddup, I ain’t cryin’— Wait,

what's up with you and that look?!"

"S-Sayaka?!"

"Eh?"

Amid Kojou's and Yukina's nervous reactions, Sayaka cutely tilted her head. Having at some point stripped off her school uniform vest, Sayaka was wearing only the blouse, its collar wide open.

As Sayaka's body wobbled and swayed, the cleavage of her breasts and even her frilly bra leaped into Kojou's field of vision. The way her skin, now pink from intoxication, was faintly glistening with sweat came off as strangely erotic.

"But isn't this island, like, kinda hot?"

"It feels that way 'cause you're drunk!"

Kojou screeched in reply to Sayaka's innocent question. She pouted, desperately pawing at the buttons of her uniform as she said:

"You can watch if you want, Kojou Akatsuki. You've already seen me a bunch of times and all. You even made me take off my bra and stuff—"

"Senpai..."

"No, you have it all wrong. Back then, it wasn't me who made her strip—!"

Kojou ferociously shook his head as Yukina shifted a frigid gaze toward him. Forcing clothes off a resistant Sayaka was actually Yuuma Tokoyogi's doing. Though, since Kojou had been firmly present, he had witnessed the proceedings from start to finish...

"That's true... It's not like seeing my breasts makes you happy anyway. I'm not cute like Yukina. Cute panties don't work for me like they do for her..."

Having opened all the front buttons of her blouse, Sayaka suddenly got cold feet and curled up, hugging her knees. It was the sort of sudden mood change that the incredibly drunk were known for.

"That's not true at all. You're cute, Sayaka! Right, senpai?"

Seeing Sayaka leaden and deflated, Yukina earnestly tried to cheer her up.

"Ah..... I think you're cute, too, Sayaka. If you keep your mouth shut, you're a

real babe; plus, you have big breasts...”

Not that this is the time and place to talk about that, thought Kojou, following suit as best he could.

Sayaka glanced at Kojou with teary eyes as she said, “Really? You really think so?”

“Well, yeah.”

“Then, you’ll drink my blood?”

“What...?”

Sayaka’s words, taking one gigantic leap in reasoning, left Kojou silent, unable to respond. *I mean*, thought Sayaka, trying to rise back up.

“I mean, those wounds... You took those hits for me... If you died because of that, I...don’t know what I’d do...”

“Wait... Don’t tell me; everything you’ve been doing since earlier was for...?”

Catching Sayaka as she was falling back down, Kojou murmured in astonishment.

Hugging Kojou in such a cozy manner, suddenly starting to strip—Kojou had thought the whole time that it wasn’t Sayaka-like behavior, no matter how drunk she was. But if Kojou thought of it as trying to get him to drink her blood, it all added up.

The blood of powerful spirit mediums like Sayaka had the effect of awakening Kojou’s abilities as a vampire. However, the trigger for the urge to drink blood was sexual arousal. Sayaka had meant to seduce Kojou to stir his vampiric urges. Her normal demeanor was so ingrained that Sayaka’s awkward actions came off as strangely adorable to him.

It was that Sayaka who rested her weight against him, unresisting and closing her eyes.

Her slender shoulder was slowly rising and falling as he listened to her regular, sleeping breaths—

“—Wait, she fell asleep?!”

Kojou unwittingly exclaimed as he kept staring at Sayaka's slender neck. Dead drunk and exhausted from crying, Sayaka was out cold.

"If Sayaka was not asleep, did you intend to do something to her?"

Yukina stared at Kojou hanging his head in dismay as she posed the frigid question.

Kojou's shoulders visibly trembled as he looked back in obvious fear and said:

"N-nah... That's..."

"Goodness... You are *truly* an indecent person, aren't you, senpai...?"

Yukina sighed very deeply. However, this was less angry exasperation than a gentle exhale mixed with a pained smile. Then, reaching a hand to the silver spear resting at her side, she turned its tip toward her own neck.

"Himeragi?! The hell?! What are you doin' all of a—?!"

Seemingly caressing the silver spear, Yukina touched it against her neck, causing droplets of blood to well up. The sight stole Kojou's attention.

"This is in Sayaka's stead."

Yukina put a hand to the breast of her own uniform. She undid the ribbon, awkwardly unfastening the uniform's buttons.

What rose up and became exposed were her collarbone, the slight swell of her breasts, and her slender waist.

"You are going off to save Ms. Minamiya and Aiba, aren't you? Then I must help you restore your power at least a little bit..."

"But, Himeragi...you're..."

Kojou's voice was strained. At present, Yukina's physical condition was far from okay. Her body was under considerable strain from rapidly proceeding down the path to angelification. It felt like she was pushing it pretty hard just to engage in normal conversation. He didn't think she could endure the strain of vampiric actions.

"It is fine. After all, this might be the last time I am able to grant you my blood, senpai."

However, Yukina spoke those words with a beautiful smile. The sight of Yukina hiding her underwear under both arms, offering her slender neck, somehow felt positively divine to even Kojou's eyes, presumably accustomed to seeing her.

It was too dazzling to gaze at directly. And yet, he could not avert his eyes.

"Um... Compared to Sayaka's, mine are rather small, so I will be embarrassed if you keep staring at them like that..."

As Kojou stared with bated breath, Yukina lowered her eyes as she gave that frail objection.

When Yukina did so, Kojou pulled her exquisite body close to him.

"S-senpai...?"

Yukina's eyes wavered in visible fear for only a moment. Even so, Kojou did not let go.

"Don't do this, Himeragi."

"Eh?"

"Don't vanish! Don't talk like it's okay if you just disappear...! If you're gone, Kirasaka, Kanase, Nagisa, me—we'll all be sad...! Don't give up! Fight until the bitter end, not just for your sake, but for everyone who cares about you...!"

Yukina's voice trembled as she seemed on the verge of tears. "But if I do that, I won't be able to stand at your side anymore, senpai...! If I stop being a Sword Shaman, then...!"

"Then just stay with me!"

Kojou powerfully refuted Yukina's frail rebuttal.

"Even if you're not a Sword Shaman of the Lion King Agency, even if you're not my watcher, you can just...stay on the island. You can just stay here!"

"I... I..."

With Kojou's words as the trigger, Yukina's entire body went soft. Then, with surprising strength, Yukina embraced Kojou with both arms.

"I don't...want to...leave! Every single day since I've come to this island has

been a golden day to me... That's why I—!"

Venting her secret thoughts, Yukina closed her eyes as if holding back tears.

She proceeded to put her breathing in order, gently pushing Kojou's body back. Both of Yukina's hands touched Kojou's cheeks. Yukina gazed at Kojou at a range close enough to feel his faint breath on her skin.

"Senpai."

Yukina gave a soft smile. All hesitation and fear vanished from her beautiful, serene eyes. All that remained was her cherubic face, from which Kojou could not avert his eyes. With the sweet scents of sweat and blood passing through his nostrils, Kojou felt a ferocious dryness in his throat. Kojou's eardrums trembled from Yukina's whisper-like voice.



“Please drink my blood. I am your watcher, after all... I always will be, to the very end.”

“Himeragi...”

Kojou, doing as his vampire instincts commanded, sank his fangs into Yukina’s neck. Their sharp white tips gently pierced and pulled in Yukina’s flesh.

“...!”

Yukina’s body stiffened from tension and pain. Noticing this, Kojou’s movements halted.

And so he remained still until Yukina stretched her hands around his back, gently whispering to him.

“...I’m all right... I’m fine, so...please don’t stop... go deeper...”

“Okay.” Kojou, finding his strength, embraced Yukina tightly. His fangs sank deeper into her neck as he felt drunk from the sensations of flesh touching and the sweet taste of blood.

“Senpai... Akatsuki-senpai...”

Continuing to breathe raggedly, Yukina called out Kojou’s name. Her entire body was drenched in sweat, and her white skin was dyed a faint red. Several times over, Yukina’s body trembled in spasms, stiffening only to soften again, until finally, she was limp and exhausted.

Kojou continued to embrace Yukina, breathing shallow breaths as if fresh from running a marathon, until the moment her eyes opened once more.

6

“H...how are your wounds?” Yukina asked in a shrill voice when she awakened in Kojou’s arms.

Her school uniform remained open, and a mark resembling a hickey had appeared on Yukina’s neck where Kojou had sunk his fangs. On top of that, the two remained locked in the embrace of each other’s arms that very moment. Thanks to that, she felt rather awkward.

“Feels like complete recovery was too much to hope for. I’m a hell of a lot better than I was, though.”

In order to conceal his own discomfort, Kojou replied in as businesslike a tone as he could. Then, glancing toward Yukina as she put her disheveled uniform in order, he said, “More to the point, Himeragi. That underwear—”

“Yes. Kano lent them to me, but...are they strange...?”

Yukina covered her breasts as a less than confident expression came over her.

Somehow or other, Kojou had the sense he’d caught glimpses of Yukina’s underwear rather frequently, but setting that aside, the bras she normally wore were exceptionally simple and unadorned. However, that day only, she was wearing a cute design embroidered with frilly lace.

Though it was true the unexpectedness of it made it look all the more charming on her, Kojou didn’t actually have that much of an interest in underwear design when push came to shove.

“Nah, I think it’s just fine. But, ah yeah... That’s why they have Kanase’s scent on ’em.”

Kojou nodded twice as everything matched up in his mind. Apparently, it hadn’t simply been his imagination; he really had caught a whiff of Kanon when Yukina had been embracing him.

However, in contrast to Kojou feeling refreshed from the solving of the mystery, all emotion vanished from Yukina’s face as she said, “...Excuse me?”

Faster than her words could reach Kojou, the backhanded fist strike she unleashed made his flank explode.

“Agh!” Kojou exclaimed, an incoherent cry trickling out. “That hurt! What gives...?!”

“I do not know you anymore, stupid senpai.”

Furious, Yukina turned her back to Kojou. *The hell was that about?* Kojou grumbled to himself, still teary-eyed as he sighed. It was a moment after that when the pair heard a tired-sounding voice right at their feet.

“...Goodness. Just when I think, oh, I have finally found them, just what are

these children doing in broad daylight at a fine place like this?"

"Master...?!" Yukina gasped and covered her mouth.

Gazing up at the sight of Kojou and Yukina together was a black cat with lustrous fur perched on top of a park bench; it was Yukari Endou's familiar. Kojou looked back at the oddly humanlike expression on the cat, his own expression strained as he said:

"Y-you saw?!"

"Did you do something that would have been inconvenient for me to see?"

"Ah, er," Kojou stammered, prevaricating with vague words. During that time, Yukina picked up her silver spear and put distance between herself and the black cat as she went on guard. She was wary of Yukari trying to bring her back by force.

"Master, I—"

"I understand. I shall try to stop you no more."

Yukari's black cat familiar casually waved a front paw as it spoke. Then her golden eyes glanced toward Kojou, glaring hard as she said:

"In return, Fourth Primogenitor, I require that you firmly take responsibility."

"R-responsibility?"

"You will place this ring on Yukina's finger."

With Kojou unwittingly indecisive, the black cat indicated her own neck. There rested a slender cat's collar; and right around the throat, something had been attached to that collar using a pink ribbon: a small, glimmering, silver ringed object.

"...A ring?"

Kojou undid the ribbon, taking the object into his hand. It was a simple ring design, seemingly from metal vertically fused together. As rings went, its size was quite small. Kojou couldn't even put it on his pinkie. He might just manage to get it on one of Yukina's slender fingers, though.

"It seems to be made of the same material as Snowdrift Wolf, but..."

Yukina spoke as she peered at the palm of Kojou's hand. Now that she mentioned it, the ring's color did greatly resemble the tip of Yukina's spear. It was a fairly light metal, but he had no doubt that it was far sturdier material than it looked.

"Well, it is much like a good luck charm. If all goes well, it will prevent Yukina from becoming a Faux-Angel."

Without thinking, Yukina said, "Got it."

With that, Kojou nodded. He didn't deign to question Yukari's words. If it might stop Yukina from vanishing, he didn't care if it was some baseless charm or an old wives' tale.

Perhaps Yukina felt the same way, for she tendered her left hand in front of Kojou without a word.

He'd thought the silver ring seemed rather small, but it was a perfect fit on Yukina's ring finger. Yukina twisted her wrist about, checking how the ring fit.

"Doesn't look like anything's particularly changed...," Kojou murmured in disappointment. He'd subconsciously gotten his hopes up for something dramatic.

"I told you, it is much like a good luck charm. All we can do is pray that it works."

Yukari's black cat familiar spoke those words with a highly suggestive expression. But in the end, it was just a cat; Kojou didn't know what that expression actually meant.

"Senpai—"

Gazing at the glimmer of the ring on her left hand, Yukina's expression hardened as she called out to Kojou.

Suddenly, a wave of bizarre demonic energy seemed to prick at Kojou's skin. He could see vermillion particles spurting up from the opposite side of the canal—and toward the sky above Keystone Gate.

A section of an exterior wall transformed into white crystals and fell away. The power of The Cleansing had turned the exterior wall into salt, most likely to

facilitate trespass into the building's interior.

“Keystone Gate... Meiga Itogami, then! Sorry, Professor Kitty, take care of Kirasaka, please!”

Lifting up the black cat, Kojou placed it upon the plastered, sleeping Sayaka as her guard. *My, my*, seemed to say the black cat's little meow, adding, “And do you have any chance of winning, Fourth Primogenitor?”

“Who knows? I mean, my Beast Vassals don't work against him.”

Kojou shook his head with a bitter smile. He hadn't intended either to bluff or to belittle himself. But now that Meiga was after Yukina, he was an opponent Kojou had to fight.

Besides, he was concerned about Asagi, still trapped inside the Coffin. Either way, running from Meiga was not an option left for Kojou to take...even if he didn't have a chance of winning.

“No. It is all right, senpai. We will win for certain—”

Yukina made her declaration by his side. To a surprised Kojou, she stared at him with a mischievous expression, nodding firmly as she gripped her silver spear.

7

“*Save...*”

They heard a girl's voice from the screen.

It was the voice of a girl the city called its idol.

Digital billboards on the streets, domestic televisions sets, tablets, smartphones—the girl's voice coursed out of every screen there was. Her extravagant outfit and shapely face remained, all emotion removed from the girl's expression as she turned her voice toward a single boy, conveying to him her message.

It was like a broken record. Repeat, repeat.

“*Kojou... Save this...island...*”

The people did not understand the meaning of the girl's words.

Even so, they understood that something was happening on that artificial isle. And in places unbeknownst to them, there was someone resisting.

It was not that they forgot the possibility that the phenomenon was someone's prank, perhaps a sabotaged transmitter.

Even so, within their hearts, the people quietly added their own calls. "Save our island," they pleaded.

They were still residents of that island, after all.

Yes. This was their Demon Sanctuary—

8

Keystone Gate was an enormous building, with the structure itself serving as both the cornerstone for Itogami Island's four Gigafloats and as a vast district in its own right. Not only was the Gigafloat Management Corporation based there; so, too, did it contain the Itogami Island city hall, the headquarters of the Island Guard, a string of restaurants, City Hotel, even high-class fashion boutiques—all mixed together in the complicated blocks that comprised the wedge-shaped building.

There was also a tiny museum inside Keystone Gate.

Its formal, official name was the Demon Sanctuary Museum. It was a facility oriented toward tourists that accumulated historical materials related to the history and exploits of Senra Itogami, the designer of Itogami Island.

However, at present, there were no tourists to be seen inside the facility. The museum had been closed ever since the Roses of Tartarus incident. Still in the midst of disaster recovery, Itogami Island had few tourists going out of their way to visit out of idle curiosity; and externally, at least, the facility had been a victim of that incident as well.

An unexpected group could be seen gathered in that very museum's employee section.

It was a robust group of armed guardsmen equipped with cutting-edge anti-demon combat suits and firearms—members of the Island Guard’s Sorcerous Suppression Group.

And escorted by them was a sharp-eyed man in traditional Japanese attire. He was chairman emeritus of the Gigafloat Management Corporation—Akishige Yaze.

STAFF ONLY was posted on the door they opened, and Akishige and the others descended to the museum’s basement.

Ahead of them, a room reminiscent of an airport control room spread open, packed to the brim with machines.

The breadth might have been around that of a midsize theater or music club. The walls were covered in countless monitors and terraced operator booths. The control panels inside the booths were lazily blinking, indicating that they remained in operation.

However, there was no sign of the operators that should have been sitting in those chairs.

Someone had put Akishige’s subordinates to sleep, whisking them away to parts unknown. There was no trace remaining of the deed, as if the perpetrator had leaped through space itself.

And standing in place of the vanished operators was a single, small-statured figure.

It was a baby-faced witch with long black hair.

“So I was right. This was where you were—Akishige Yaze.”

When the man entered the control room, Natsuki Minamiya looked up at him with a cold smile.

“Natsuki Minamiya...the Witch of the Void, is it?” Akishige replied without any change in his expression.

Meanwhile, the armed guardsmen swiftly went on the move, the unit deploying to visibly surround her. Maintaining their silence, they trained their gun barrels on Natsuki.

She snorted, calmly surveying the room.

“So this is the control room for the Coffin... A safety mechanism prepared in the event your subordinates might betray you. It is very much in keeping with a sly fox like you.”

“A mere federal officer from the Attack Mage Branch, running her mouth like she knows what she’s talking about.”

Akishige cast his emotionless gaze downward upon Natsuki.

“But I shall forgive it, Witch of the Void—you certainly are capable. It would be a pity to kill someone of your caliber.”

Natsuki listened to Akishige’s threat with a similarly neutral expression.

It was said that the interior of the submarine Cain’s Coffin was isolated from the outside world, a realm into which only the Priestess of Cain could intrude.

But she did not think a man with Akishige Yaze’s personality would ever seriously accept the existence of any realm beyond his dominion, to say nothing of a realm that was the key to The Cleansing.

Akishige Yaze was definitely keeping hidden a way to control Cain’s Coffin from the outside—that was how Natsuki had read the situation. Apparently, her deduction had been right on the money.

“Even with the intellect of Cain stuffed into it, and boasting computational capability rivaling that of a God, the Coffin itself is nothing more than a simple submarine. If cut off from Itogami Island, it would simply sink to the bottom of the sea.”

Akishige sounded solemn, not for Natsuki’s benefit, but so that his subordinates of the SSG might take pride in his words.

“And what of Asagi Aiba left inside it?” Natsuki quietly pressed.

Akishige let a tiny laugh slip. “The Priestess of Cain? She is an excellent human sacrifice, but that does not make her an irreplaceable component. We would merely need to search for a new candidate.”

“The Coffin is supposed to be the nucleus of the network controlling Itogami Island. If you were to lose it, Itogami City would fall into a mass panic.”

“What of it? The residents of this island are nothing more than human sacrifices themselves, gathered so that the might of The Cleansing can be demonstrated to the world. As long as Itogami Island, the altar itself, continues to exist, how many people die upon it is a trifling concern.”

Akishige sounded exceedingly calm.

He was asserting that, to nullify the power of The Cleansing stolen by Meiga Itogami, he would cut the Coffin loose. Even if the result was Asagi Aiba losing her life and Itogami Island falling into a panic, that was fine with him.

“Or would you care to try to stop me with your body in that state, Witch of the Void?”

The air swayed all around Akishige. The Yaze family was a direct line of Hyper Adapters, generation after generation. Akishige, head of that family, naturally possessed that ability.

And he had noticed Natsuki’s wounded physical state. Even if she was the Witch of the Void, he would not be defeated—he was doubtlessly sure of this.

However, Natsuki looked overhead, a mocking smile on her face.

“No, let’s not, Akishige Yaze. It doesn’t look like I need to lift a finger anyway.”

“What...?!”

Following Natsuki’s gaze, Akishige shifted his own overhead.

It was a moment later that the ceiling of the control room came crashing down. The exterior wall, acting like a stout blast shelter, broke down and collapsed like so much sand. No, it was not sand, but a white, translucent powder—salt.

In an instant, someone had turned the exterior wall to salt and brought it down.

“Meiga Itogami?!”

The light of vermillion particles trickled through the dense mist of salt hovering in midair. Without a sound, Meiga Itogami, black spear in hand, descended into the control room.

The members of the SSG tried to turn their gun barrels toward Meiga, but Meiga's attack proved swifter. Shot and felled by vermillion bullets, the members transformed into pillars of salt and crumbled away.

Then the bullets unleashed by Meiga bore down on Akishige, who stood still without a word.

However, without Akishige moving a single finger, the many bullets flying at him from every direction were shot out of the air. He had unleashed invisible blades that had counteracted the vermillion bullets.

"So you warded off the light of The Cleansing, Elder Akishige. No wonder you style yourselves the descendants of Cain."

Meiga smiled with apparent delight as he spoke.

In contrast, unconcealable unease had come over Akishige's face. To Akishige, the traitor Meiga knowing of that control room's existence was an unexpected occurrence.

"Hell Wolf, errand boy of the dead—what, exactly, are your intentions?"

"I would prefer that you do not address me by that name, but oh well," Meiga replied to Akishige's detestable term for him with a serene expression. "I have but a single objective... The complete revival of Cain, the Sinful God. The Cleansing is a tool toward that end."

"Cain's...complete revival...?" Akishige exclaimed, temple bulging.

Meiga spread both arms in a theatrical fashion. "Precisely. Just as my father restored me to life from a corpse, I shall revive Cain, the Sinful God, from the Memory of the Sinful God left in the Coffin. His mind, his consciousness! If it is for His sake, I shall offer my very flesh—!"

"Have you gone mad, Hell Wolf?!"

Akishige crudely shouted. All the composure in his voice from earlier was nowhere to be found. He thrust an invisible blade in Meiga's direction, but a dodecagonal bulwark deployed by Meiga obstructed it.

"All that your grandfather wanted was the Forbidden Ritual of The Cleansing. He did not desire the resurrection of Cain himself. If such a thing becomes a

reality, the world itself will be destroyed...!”

“And what if I were to tell you that is the very thing I desire?” Meiga’s tone was gentle. If anything, it felt like he was enjoying having unnerved Akishige. “With Itogami Island and the computational ability of the Priestess of Abel, the effect of The Cleansing can only affect a radius of dozens of kilometers at the utmost— However, with the abilities of its proper wielder, the Priestess of Cain, The Cleansing would ride the dragon lines, surely covering the entirety of this planet—”

“So that’s why...”

Akishige was left speechless. In his place, Natsuki interjected herself into the conversation.

“So that is why the Priestess of Abel is cooperating with you, Meiga Itogami. The two of you, brought back as corpses, will destroy the world once more. What is your objective—revenge...?”

“Yes. It is precisely as you say. We cannot forgive the world that betrayed us—or the people who robbed us of warmth. Not the Priestess of Abel—and not I.”

“You’re insane...,” Akishige spat.

To him, a prisoner of profit in the material world, Meiga’s thought process was beyond all comprehension—the product of madness. With Akishige’s expression twisted into fear, Meiga shifted his hollow gaze toward him and said:

“We are simply performing our duties as the dead, nothing more. We require no grand philosophies nor the sweet nothings of justice. We will descend to hell, taking with us each and every one of the living that we can. Is that not what magic, what curses, were originally intended to be—?! This will be our Cleansing!”

At the same time as he made that smiling declaration, Meiga unleashed his vermillion bullets.

These did not number ten or twenty. There were a hundred, perhaps two hundred, bearing down upon Akishige Yaze all at once. It was impossible for

even the man's invisible blades to deflect them all.

“Ngh—?!”

Surrounded by incredible explosions, Akishige vanished from sight.

Setting eyes upon that spectacle, it was unfathomable for the few remaining survivors of the SSG to maintain their will to fight. A man seeming like a squad leader shouted “Retreat!” It was every man for himself as the members fled the control room.

Meiga coolly watched them go. Then he reoriented himself toward Natsuki.

“—Are you next, Natsuki Minamiya? Or will you leap through space as you always do? Though even if you do run, should this world collapse, it will end the same way for you.”

As Meiga made that detached statement, his voice carried no hostility toward Natsuki. Now that he controlled the power of The Cleansing, he did not feel threatened by Natsuki any longer.

However, knowing this full well, Natsuki let out a chuckle, adding a cold smile. “Flee? No, you are mistaken. It is you who needs to flee, not I, Meiga Itogami.”

“What...?”

Natsuki's composure, bizarre to Meiga, made him momentarily knit his brows.

It was a moment later that the control room was filled with high-density demonic energy, enough to make the very ground quake. The swirling vortex of demonic energy became a dazzling thunderbolt, in turn transforming into a single, enormous summoned beast—a vampire's Beast Vassal.

“Regulus Aurum—!”

Together with a boy's ferocious roar, the lightning lion swung its front paws.

Meiga instantly thrust out with his black spear to parry that blow. Meiga's black spear had nullified the demonic energy, but it could not erase the shock wave created by that explosive demonic energy. Accordingly, Meiga was sent flying backward, colliding against the control room wall.

Even so, Meiga was unharmed, thanks to the work of the ghostly girl who

appeared behind him. A vermillion bulwark created by the Priestess of Abel had enveloped and protected Meiga.

As he rose to his feet, fresh yet stagnant blood slowly flowed and fell from his forehead. The impact just then had reopened the scar from the wound inflicted by Paper Noise.

That fact seemed to irritate Meiga.

And what irritated him even further was the fact that the attack just then had not been aimed at him. That golden Beast Vassal had been summoned for the sole purpose of punching through the control room wall. To reach the control room even a second faster, the offending wall had to be destroyed. That was the true objective behind that Beast Vassal summon. Meiga had merely been caught up in it, nothing more. Meiga, the man who had supposedly obtained the power to destroy the world itself.

Meiga glared into the darkness with hatred in his eyes.

Standing there was a teenage vampire with a languid expression on his face.

“Y’know, I’ve really gotta say, having to trust that shitty dad of mine really burns me, but—”

As he stepped over the rubble strewn at his feet, the boy murmured as if making excuses for something. A girl at his side gripping a silver spear listened to his words.

Finally, the boy slowly looked up, narrowing his glimmering, scarlet eyes.

“We’ve come to put an end to your Cleansing, Meiga Itogami.”

As Meiga looked back at him, unmoved, the Fourth Primogenitor—Kojou Akatsuki—flashed a ferocious smile.

9

Hexagonal vermillion bullets bearing the element of earth went flying, penetrating the cloud of dust, and exploded at Kojou’s feet, making the rubble in the surrounding area vanish without a trace.

That was just a warning shot. *Approach no further*, cautioned Meiga's admonition.

"What are you trying to do at this point, Fourth Primogenitor? I thought I had made it abundantly clear that you are no threat to me." Irritation was thick in Meiga's voice.

The red particles blanketing the area around him transformed into tiny bullets—more than a hundred, enough to cover an entire wall of the control room. If one were to be struck by all of them, even a vampire's body would surely be completely annihilated, just like the rubble moments before—

Meiga's statement was made in the context of having put such overwhelming might on display.

"Akishige Yaze meant to destroy you to display the might of The Cleansing, but to me, you are not worth even that. Begone."

"Not bluffing, huh? Well, you might have a point...," Kojou commented, unmoved.

The sheer lack of drive evident from the boy's demeanor perplexed Meiga.

As for the Fourth Primogenitor, he looked back at Meiga, faintly curling up the corners of his lips as he challenged, "But never mind me. What about Asagi?"

"What are you getting at...?" Meiga's brows trembled with impatience. To provoke him further, Kojou took his time surveying the control room.

"This is the control device for the Coffin, right? If you really had The Cleansing in the palm of your hand, why'd you bother coming here?"

"I see...," Meiga said before trailing off into silence.

Natsuki let out a quiet "Heh," making a sound of distinct interest as she stared at the side of his face. "To resurrect Cain, you cannot avoid bringing the contents of the Coffin outside. Well, it isn't hard to guess why; the Coffin is a device to preserve Cain's memory, after all. But if you truly had the Coffin under your thumb, you could simply enter it directly."

"So if you came here, it's because you don't have access to the Coffin's contents. How's that possible, if the Priestess of Abel jacked the Coffin?"

Kojou continued after a brief pause.

“Asagi said ‘Save our island.’ She didn’t say *Save me*—she was focused on every resident of the island. She could have taken control of the Coffin and come out on her own power any time she wanted. Maybe the reason she hasn’t is to keep the Priestess of Abel tied up.”

“Silence, Fourth Primogenitor—,” Meiga snarled. Behind him, the sight of the ghostly girl floated up once more. The shapely face of the Priestess of Abel was twisted in vivid hatred.

Paying neither any heed, Kojou continued.

“Meiga Itogami, Priestess of Abel—you two don’t have The Cleansing in your grip or anything close. What you have only skims the surface. And that’s because Asagi’s kept the contents of the Coffin—Cain’s intellect—locked down tight. All by herself, she’s been protecting Itogami Island, even now. That’s Itogami Island’s idol for you.”

Kojou grinned with pride for his friend.

Meiga Itogami’s power of The Cleansing was certainly strong, but it was a pale shadow of its proper might. At most, it could wipe out a single city—it was nowhere near enough to destroy the world itself.

They’d thought this was because the Priestess of Abel was forcing the power of The Cleansing to activate. That assumption was wrong, though. The reason the Priestess of Abel could not draw out The Cleansing’s full capabilities was not because she wasn’t the proper priestess; what had sealed that power was Asagi.

Asagi wasn’t locked inside the Coffin—it was the other way around. She’d holed herself up in the Coffin to protect Kojou and the others. Knowing her, she was probably waiting around bored while everyone else gave the Priestess of Abel what was coming to her.

To the very end, Asagi had never told Kojou *Come save me, dammit!* She’d said “Save our island.” Truly, from the beginning, she had been the one saving Kojou.

“And...what of it?!”

Meiga's eyes clouded in anger. The outer layer of his composure was stripped away. Now all that remained underneath was his anger and hatred toward the world.

"Even if it is incomplete, The Cleansing's might is already in our hands. The Priestess of Cain can resist all she wants. Once I annihilate all of you, I can take my time dealing with her—!"

"Nah, Meiga Itogami. Your revenge ends here. And that's because Asagi gave us the chance we needed to beat you to a pulp—"

Fangs bared in his grin, Kojou released a huge burst of demonic energy from his whole body. Meiga, supposedly able to nullify demonic energy, stood awed by its sheer force, retreating a single step in fear.

"Now let's get this started, Meiga Itogami— From here on, this is *my* fight!"

"Silence—!"

Meiga fired the thousands of bullets hovering in the air around him. Against their power to alter the world itself, robbing a vampire of his supernatural power, even a Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor could not escape unscathed.

Then a dazzling, glimmering barrier from the Divine Oscillation Effect stopped every last one of those bullets cold.

"No, senpai. This is *our* fight—!"

Driving her silver spear into the floor, Yukina smiled with a firm expression. From her entire body, divine essence far surpassing human limits flowed through the silver spear.

That power forced back the vermillion particles, counteracting Meiga's bullets.

"You... You intend to interfere with me to the very end, Yukina Himeragi—!"

Meiga Itogami directed his black spear at her. No matter how much she amplified her divine essence, as long as Meiga wielded the spear that nullified spiritual energy, she could not harm him in any way.

Knowing this full well, Yukina resolutely leaped forward. Enshrouded in a pale

radiance, her silver spear rent the air as it stretched toward Meiga.

“Snowdrift Wolf!”

“A Schneewaltzer! As if such a thing could—”

Meiga’s black spear clashed with Yukina’s silver spear. No matter how great the force of her running start, the feather-light Yukina could never overpower the jiangshi’s brute force.

Even so, it was not a glimmer of despair that hovered in Yukina’s eyes—but trust.

“C’mon over, Cor-Tauri Succinum—!”

“What?!!”

A stake of scalding magma burst up, destroying the floor beneath Meiga’s feet. This attack belonged to the Fourth Primogenitor’s Beast Vassal Number Two, a minotaur with a body of magma.

It harnessed the power of earth, so it could only use a heavily limited portion of its power on an artificial isle floating atop the ocean. Even so, its magma spear, reaching several thousand degrees, could burn a jiangshi body to ash with ease.

Furthermore, with Yukina holding his attention, Meiga could not fend off the attack.

“Ugh—High Priestess!”

Backed into a corner, Meiga called out to the Priestess of Abel. The ghostly girl constructed out of vermillion particles deployed a bulwark around Meiga. Having barely held out against Kojou’s attack, Meiga retreated.

As he did so, fresh yet stagnant blood spurted from his left shoulder.

During the moment when he was defending against Kojou’s Beast Vassal, Yukina’s spear had lightly rent his flesh.

“So it really does have that flaw, Meiga Itogami...just like she figured.” Kojou seemed almost disappointed as he exhaled.

Yukina had pointed out their chance for victory against Meiga Itogami, and it

was Paper Noise who had shown the way.

During the battle at Stratum Zero, Paper Noise had injured Meiga Itogami, even though he undoubtedly had Fangzahn active.

“The reason your Fangzahn is called a failure—I had thought it was because only a jiangshi could make proper use of it. But that is not so,” Yukina said before she landed on her feet, spinning backward as she did so. With a diligent poise of her spear, she continued:

“Fangzahn is a frightening weapon that can nullify both demonic and spiritual energy. However, it can only eliminate one of those forces at a time. Its flaw is that it cannot eliminate spiritual and demonic energy simultaneously. That was why it was deemed a failure and discontinued.”

Meiga listened in silence as Yukina’s assertion seemed to drive him further into a corner.

The Divine Oscillation Effect of Demon-Purging Twin Spear Type Zero—Fangzahn—obstructed Paper Noise’s ability. In other words, this was proof that Paper Noise relied on magical energy rather than spiritual.

In spite of this, Fangzahn, which supposedly nullified both spiritual and demonic energy, had failed to block her attack. And the reason why.....was because Meiga had been nullifying Yukina’s spiritual energy at the same time. Meiga could not fend off magical energy while also negating spiritual energy. If, in contrast, he was negating demonic power instead, he was defenseless against the spiritual—just as when Kojou’s Beast Vassal attacked him, Yukina’s spear reached his body.

“Yes—I had not wished to accept that such a flawed divine armament was my own craftsmanship. Hence, why it is a discontinued weapon.” Meiga detested the black spear in his hands. “However, you have realized this too late. By using it with the world-altering power of The Cleansing, I can compensate for Fangzahn’s flaw. You all never had a chance of victory to begin with!”

Once again, Meiga summoned his vermillion bullets out of midair. The power of The Cleansing was bolstered by the dragon lines that coursed over Itogami Island’s surface. As long as he remained atop that island, Meiga could employ a nearly inexhaustible supply of energy. If the battle became prolonged, it would

be Kojou's side that would be wiped out first.

But even so, Kojou's expression did not falter.

"That ain't true at all! C'mon over, Beast Vassal Number Ten, Dabih Crystallus!!"

"What—?!"

Kojou had summoned a beautiful aquatic dragon with glittering silver scales. On its front limbs were translucent wings, and its ram-like spiral horn was a beautiful, gleaming pillar of crystal.

Captivated by that crystal pillar, the Priestess of Abel's movements came to a halt. The vermillion bullets concealing the whole of Meiga's body disintegrated as well.

"A Beast Vassal of the Fourth Primogenitor—?! The power of Charm?! Don't tell me it's controlling the High Priestess?!"

Kojou's Beast Vassal had seized control of the spiritual entity that was the Priestess of Abel. Realizing this, Meiga lashed out with Fangzahn, attempting to sever the Beast Vassal's demonic energy.

During that time, Kojou turned to his small-statured homeroom teacher and shouted, "Natsuki, I'm counting on ya!"

"Hmph."

Instantly reading Kojou's intent, Natsuki opened a teleportation gate.

The destination of the warp in space was the sky above Keystone Gate's Stratum Zero. Thanks to the area having sustained major damage in the previous battle, civilians were not permitted entry. Even if Kojou unleashed power in a somewhat spectacular fashion, he no longer needed to worry about involving the citizens.

"Let's go, Meiga Itogami! C'mon over, Sadalmelik Albus! Al-Nasl Minium! Kiffa Ater!"

Kojou summoned a slew of the Beast Vassals he had tamed. An undine with the lower body of a great serpent, a scarlet bicorn, and an enormous sword controlling gravity itself bore down on Meiga, unleashing their demonic energy

without restraint.

“How...foolish...!” Meiga exclaimed as he deployed a vermillion wall.

The Beast Vassals’ demonic energy whipped up a destructive storm in the area surrounding Keystone Gate. The artificial ground split open, buildings crumbled, and water flooded the various streets.

The fortification protecting Meiga wobbled insecurely as sparks scattered from it. Supplied with magical energy from the dragon lines, the power of The Cleansing was theoretically inexhaustible, but it was limited by the extent of the Priestess of Abel’s computational ability. Temporal regression of matter, blast winds, gravity—calculating how to nullify demonic energy of such differing characteristics required her to endure tremendous stress.

All that said, he could not use Fangzahn to nullify demonic energy thanks to the divine essence from Yukina’s silver spear. If Meiga were to use his ability to nullify Kojou’s demonic energy, the girl would no doubt strike at him that very instant.

And then—

“I’m not done yet! C’mon over, Regulus Aurum! Natra Cinereus! Mesarthim Adamas!”

Kojou summoned another wave of even more Beast Vassals. Demonic energy attacks of the other elements assaulted Meiga in a volley from all sides, only further increasing the burden on the Priestess of Abel. His defenses were cracking even more.

“I see now. The various elements possessed by the Fourth Primogenitor’s Beast Vassals enable him to oppose the power of The Cleansing—”

Damaged by the backlash of the vermillion particles, Meiga twisted his lips into a smile.

The Fourth Primogenitor, who was *constructed* to be the World’s Mightiest Vampire, was a god-killing weapon built for the sake of defeating Cain, the Sinful God. Such a dangerous being had not been granted twelve Beast Vassals without there being any meaning or purpose.

“However, oh so incomplete Fourth Primogenitor—how long can your mind hold out while using this many Beast Vassals simultaneously? You truly are no threat to me—!”

Proud, Meiga had no doubts of his impending victory. Even simultaneous attacks from six Beast Vassals had not pushed the bulwark beyond his control. At some point, Kojou’s strength would be exhausted, and then there would be none left to bring The Cleansing to a halt.

Even so, Kojou smiled, shaking his head as he said, “Yeah, I guess. If it were just me ‘n’ Himeragi fighting you, yeah—”

“What...?!”

The whites of Meiga’s eyes were plain to see as he opened them wide in fright. He was staring at the top deck of a huge submarine—Cain’s Coffin. Boldly parked atop it was a red robotic tank.

Using the drills equipped on the tank’s forelegs, it busted the submarine’s hull, and a lone girl could be seen emerging from that large hole. She wore a school uniform, awry in just the right ways, and her hair was styled in an extravagant manner. This was a high school girl who embodied the latest fashions. She carried a standard notebook PC at her side, the kind sold all over the city.

“I doth apologize for the wait, Lady Empress—”

The driver of the robot tank addressed the girl in a grandiose tone.

The girl crawled out of the submarine and stretched her back, almost as if she’d just awakened, exhaling before she complained, “I really was getting sick of waiting. I had so much time on my hands like you wouldn’t believe.”

Speaking these words, the girl opened her notebook PC without fanfare. Her colorfully painted nails nimbly clacked on the keyboard.

“Well, thanks to that, I’ve put on the finishing touches to prepare a revenge well served— Let’s go, Mogwai!”

“Keh-keh. Roger that, li’l miss!”

A very sarcastic-sounding artificial voice echoed above Meiga’s head.

The voice was coming from the ghostly, scarred girl floating overhead. The vermillion particles that had composed her body began crumbling away and transforming. The girl's beautiful yet unsightly form changed into that of an avatar—that of a badly sewn teddy bear.

“Wha—?!”

The vermillion particles blanketing the area around Meiga vanished. The dissipation of the Priestess of Abel meant that control of The Cleansing had been hijacked.

However, the power of The Cleansing itself had by no means dissipated. From the avatar known as Mogwai, a number of vermillion bullets shot out, descending upon the destroyed sections of Keystone Gate.

It was a moment later that a miracle occurred in Keystone Gate and the buildings surrounding it.

The building that had turned into a pillar of salt and collapsed, the supposedly destroyed exterior wall, the traces of destruction left by Kojou's Beast Vassals—surrounded by a vermillion glow, they were restored to their former state in the blink of an eye. The changes in the world arising from The Cleansing flowed backward, re-creating the destroyed buildings. Probably, the SSG members killed by Meiga had been restored as well.

“Asagi Aiba... So this is the power of the true Priestess of Cain...?!”

Meiga Itogami was left behind on the ground's surface, his voice trembling in horror.

He no longer had the Priestess of Abel at his back. Thanks to Asagi having hijacked Itogami Island's main computer—the Five Elements—the Priestess of Abel had disappeared.

“I see... From the beginning, the Fourth Primogenitor's attack was intended to rob me of the High Priestess's computational ability. He was certain that if I lost that, Asagi Aiba would seize back the Five Elements—”

Meiga, wobbling to his feet, readied his black spear. His hollow eyes were directed at Yukina. Even if his desire for the complete resurrection of Cain was lost to him, his hatred for her, as she inched ever closer to becoming a Faux-

Angel, was undiminished.

Fangzahn still remained in Meiga's hands. That cursed spear granted him the power to nullify spiritual energy, and thus, to defeat a Faux-Angel.

However, Kojou stood before him.

"—It's over, Meiga Itogami," he declared quietly.

From his raised right arm, a cloud of demonic energy resembling fresh blood flowed forth.

"Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa—!!"

Meiga Itogami screamed. The blades of his black spear traced a complex magical symbol that floated up, enveloped by dazzling demonic energy—nullifying radiance.

It was then that a solemn chant woven by a girl's lips resonated across them.

Raising her silver spear aloft, Yukina danced. She looked like a swordsman praying to the gods for victory. Or perhaps she danced like a priestess to whom victory had been foretold.

"—I, Maiden of the Lion, Sword Shaman of the High God, beseech thee."

"I, Kojou Akatsuki, inheritor of the Kaleid Blood, release thee from thy bonds!"

Shrouded in the radiance of divine essence, Yukina sprinted.

Simultaneously, Kojou deployed his own demonic energy. It transformed into the figure of a sentient, phantasmal beast—an enormous, twin-headed dragon covered in scales the color of quicksilver.

"O purifying light, O divine wolf of the snowdrift, by your steel divine will, strike down the devils before me!"

"C'mon over, Al-Meissa Mercury—!"

The voices of the World's Mightiest Vampire and of his observer echoed together.

It was a simultaneous attack of demonic energy and divine essence. Meiga's black spear could not nullify them both.

“Why...? You two are victims just like I am, used by the Lion King Agency... And yet...why are you...?”

The maws of the twin-headed dragon consumed Meiga’s black spear, breaking it apart.

And then, bathed in the divine essence enveloping Snowdrift Wolf, Meiga’s slender body wavered. As if trying to grasp some unseen light, his hand reached out, finding nothing but empty air as he finally fell to his knees, collapsing on the spot.

“Touka...”

His lips trembled slightly. The fragments of his shattered spear made a hard *clang* as they fell onto the concrete surface around him.

All that remained was a gentle tranquility—

A tranquility declaring that The Cleansing had come to an end.

10

“Is it over...?”

Looking down at the immobile Meiga, Kojou murmured, still wary.

Gently lowering her silver-colored spear, Yukina reoriented herself toward Kojou. A fleeting smile came over her. That frail smile, as if she might vanish that very moment, made Kojou’s heart beat out of his chest.

“Himeragi!”

As he gazed on with astonishment, Yukina swayed. Immediately racing forward, he caught her as she fell gently into his arms. The sheer weightlessness of her body made every hair on his neck stand up.

“I’m...sorry...senpai...”

Yukina spoke in a whisper. Kojou hugged her tightly.

“Keep it together, Himeragi! Weren’t you going to keep watching over me forever and ever?!”

“I am sorry...but...”

Yukina lifted her head, weakly shaking it side to side. She wore a meek expression. Taking great pains to speak, like it was something very hard to admit, Yukina continued.

“I am starving...”

“Huh?”

At that instant, Kojou likely had an extremely stupid look on his face.

As Kojou continued his silence, his ears picked up an adorable little growl from Yukina’s stomach.

“Um...what about becoming a Faux-Angel? How’s your body?”

Finally coming back to his senses, Kojou posed those questions. He still couldn’t quite wrap his head around an empty stomach having made her dizzy enough to cause her to fall over in such a suggestive manner.

Yukina herself must have felt rather apologetic about that, for she lowered her gaze.

“Um...it seems to be fine. My spiritual energy is not running amok, either, so...”

“Even after pushing it that hard with Snowdrift Wolf?”

“That’s probably...thanks to the ring...”

She lifted up her left hand as she spoke. The silver ring handed to them by Yukari was firmly on Yukina’s slender ring finger. Maybe it was just Kojou’s imagination, but the slender slit running along the ring’s center seemed to be faintly glowing red.

The heck does that mean? thought Kojou, tilting his head as his and Yukina’s faces met.

A black cat appeared at the pair’s feet to answer that very question.

“It would seem things are going quite well.”

“Professor Kitty...!”

Kojou reached a hand out to the black cat in surprise. Yukari Endou's familiar used Kojou's arm to climb up onto Yukina's shoulder. Glancing at the state of Yukina's ring, it made a sound of apparent satisfaction.

"Master...what is this ring...?" Yukina asked.

Instead of answering her question, the black cat stared at Kojou and gave a leering smile.

"Fourth Primogenitor... This means that Yukina has become your Blood Vassal."

"Blood...Vassal...?" Kojou curled his lips, perplexed.

The black cat nodded deeply. *"Some call them Blood Concubines, or even Brides. A pseudo-vampire granted the power of immortality by the vampire that is her lord."*

"B-Bride?!"

Hearing the black cat's words, Yukina's little voice went shrill.

Though it was a common folktale, becoming a vampire from a vampire drinking your blood was not complete nonsense. A human being that had taken in a piece of a vampire's body obtained a body just as immortal as the vampire lord's own. These were the pseudo-vampires known as Blood Servants.

"...Wait, you made Himeragi into a pseudo-vampire?!" Kojou glared at the black cat in a rage.

Inevitably, pseudo-vampires lived every day, month, and year of their eternal lives with their vampire masters. This was by no means a blessing. And yet, Yukari Endou had made Yukina Kojou's vassal in spite of this, to the point of ignoring what Kojou and Yukina, the actual parties concerned, thought of the matter.

"Well, properly speaking, Yukina is not a genuine Bride. That ring is merely acting as a ritual spell catalyst to create a spiritual pathway. If I had to put a label on it, she is akin to a fiancée. After all, were she to become a complete Blood Vassal, she would lose the ability to use spiritual energy."

"That doesn't mean...," Kojou snarled. *What, you think you can just do this*

without asking? He grimaced.

Yukina's face was completely red to the tips of her ears, squirming as she stammered, "F-fiancée..."

Exasperated, the black cat sighed. *"Fourth Primogenitor, within you rests the divine essence of the Faux-Angel that your Beast Vassal consumed and sent flying off to gods know where."*

"Y-yeah." Kojou awkwardly nodded.

During the battle with Kanon Kanase, Kojou, bathed in divine essence and on the verge of death, had somehow survived thanks to that Beast Vassal, the Dimension Eater. At the time, it was none other than Yukina who had provided him with the blood that had made that Beast Vassal fully awaken.

"That ring borrows the power of your Beast Vassal, giving it the effect of disintegrating the excess divine essence created by Snowdrift Wolf, you see. Though, witnessing this for ourselves was the only way to know for sure if it would actually work. At any rate—"

"You mean, by wearing that, Himeragi can keep living life like she's been doing until now?"

"So long as you remain close to Yukina, that is. Well, even if you are apart, it should not be a problem so long as you both remain on this island," the black cat explained in a nonchalant tone.

Yukina gasped at those words, lifting her face in surprise as she said, "Then my mission..."

"Well, you can continue watching the Fourth Primogenitor for the time being. The Lion King Agency cannot afford to feed an idle mouth, after all," the black cat murmured bluntly with a snort.

"Master..."

Yukina's expression brightened. It was youthful and soft; she seemed like a totally different person from the one with an air of tragedy hovering around her until moments before.

However, Kojou was still suspicious. He directed his attention back to the cat.

“A spiritual pathway linked by a ring... What’s the logic behind that anyway?”

“What, did you not know? The creation of a Blood Vassal requires the master vampire granting a part of his body. Inside that ring is a rib fragment of yours.”

“A piece of my rib? When the hell did you get something like...? Aaah...!”

Kojou remembered the very first time he had met the real Yukari Endou face-to-face. At the time, she’d attacked Kojou for no apparent reason, slicing into Kojou’s chest.

What if the purpose of that attack had been to obtain one of Kojou’s ribs? That would mean Yukari had come to Itogami Island with the intent of saving Yukina all along.

Say that in the first place, dammit, thought Kojou, unwittingly sulking.

“Actually, aren’t you a little grossed out stuffing some other person’s rib into a ring?”

“Better that than a tuft of your hair and a touch of spittle. I properly disinfected and sintered it, so it was not a messy job— As for the gross factor, hmm, I suppose your mileage may vary.”

The black cat gave Yukina a sidelong glance. She was closing and opening her left hand over and over, gazing at the ring in satisfaction. Kojou had no idea what thoughts were going through her mind while she was staring at the thing.

However, as he watched Yukina doing that, a thought suddenly arose in the back of Kojou’s mind.

“Hey, that Meiga Itogami guy... Why did he call that black spear a failure, I wonder?”

It was a divine armament that could negate not only demonic energy but spiritual energy as well. He didn’t think that, properly speaking, the Lion King Agency, for which Meiga had worked as an engineer, required something like that. After all, a weapon that nullified spiritual energy was able to rob a Sword Shaman of her combat strength, just as Fangzahn had done to Yukina.

If it was a tool meant to save a lover who had turned into a Faux-Angel due to her out of control spiritual energy...

“Maybe he made that spear for the sake of that Touka person? Maybe to him, that spear was meant to be the same as that ring is for Himeragi...”

“That might well be so. Though, I am certain the man himself would never admit such a thing,” the black cat murmured in what came off as a forlorn manner.

Without a word, Yukina bit her lip, shifting her gaze toward the fallen Meiga. She suddenly stiffened.

“Eh...?!”

In turn, Kojou looked over, whereupon his own eyes widened in shock.

Meiga, supposedly fallen with his strength exhausted, was nowhere to be seen. All that remained were the fragments of his shattered black spear.

“He vanished...?!” Kojou murmured, standing still and helpless.

Bathed in vast divine essence, Meiga had been rendered immobile. For that matter, it should have been difficult just to maintain his body. However, in reality, he had vanished from sight.

“Where the...hell did he...?” Kojou asked to no one in particular.

No one replied to the question. Kojou was simply bathed in the rays of the setting sun of late-day Itogami Island.

11

The girl awaited him in a passageway in the deepest section of Keystone Gate.

It was a girl with a plain face and boorish glasses. She was holding a thick book against her side.

She was in a top-secret passageway only the upper management of the Gigafloat Management Corporation was privy to, but Akishige Yaze was not particularly surprised to see that the girl had appeared there.

“Koyomi Shizuka—of the Three Saints of the Lion King Agency. I had heard Meiga Itogami had given you rather rough treatment, but it seems you are up to walking around.”

Akishige spoke coldly. However, even as a diplomatic gesture, the girl would be hard-pressed to call Akishige's condition *in good health*. Flesh had been gouged out across his entire body, and his well-tailored Japanese-style clothing was dyed pitch-black from absorbing blood. These were wounds inflicted from Meiga Itogami's vermillion bullets.

Staring at Akishige's outward appearance, the girl reverentially bowed her head. "All thanks to you."

Akishige used the momentary opening from Shizuka's downward gaze to activate his Hyper Adaptive power—invisible blades created via psychic energy. The ability made it possible for him to slice apart everything within his field of vision.

Since it was not an attack wrought by magic, no magic barrier could block it. Even with a Sword Shaman's Spirit Sight, it was impossible to anticipate and track the invisible blades. It could defeat even one of the Three Saints of the Lion King Agency without fail—

As long as he actually launched the attack.

"Guo...!!"

A momentary silence arrived—and then it was broken. By the time Akishige realized what had happened, his body had been slammed into the passageway's wall. Both of his arms had been deeply impaled by pages torn from a book, sewing his body to the wall. Akishige's ability had never activated.

The girl's attack ceased just before Akishige could use his own.

"It is futile, Akishige Yaze. Your ability cannot defeat mine."

The girl spoke quietly as she closed the cover of her book.

"Hmph." Akishige smiled at his own expense as he said, "Paper Noise... The absolute right of initiative, is it? What an abominable thing. Your family is no doubt the same as mine, both descendants of the Sinful God."

"Yes. Ours is a cursed family, the same as yours."

Without any special pride in her victory, the girl pulled out a single document. It was an official, court-issued document—an arrest warrant.

“Akishige Yaze—in the name of the Lion King Agency, I hereby place you under arrest. The charges are aiding in the commission of large-scale sorcerous terrorism and numerous grave violations of the Special District Public Security Code.”

“You arrest me on the authority of the Lion King Agency...? Do you really think you can do such a thing?”

Even with his face contorting in pain, Akishige did not lose his cool. If he employed the authority at his disposal, what could the mere Lion King Agency do to him? That was the confidence that bolstered his arrogant words.

But it was not Koyomi who replied to Akishige’s question. A young man emerged from the back of the passageway and said, “This would probably have been too much during the time you chaired the Yaze consortium.”

Taking note of the man, Akishige blinked slightly.

“I see, Kazuma... So this is your doing...”

Akishige spoke with a flat voice. Somehow, he maintained his dignity to barely hold back and conceal his inner turmoil—but his reaction only served to broadcast the vast extent of his surprise. That moment, for the first time, the man who had employed his own biological sons as disposable pawns was being made disposable himself.

Paying no heed to his father’s turmoil, Kazuma Yaze spoke in his usual, businesslike tone.

“Just earlier, the Council of Elders selected a new leader in place of the previous chairman, *the late* Akishige Yaze. Motoki is our new president.”

“What...?”

“Surely you’re not surprised. He, too, is a legitimate heir to the Four Forbidden Symbols. Furthermore, he is very close friends with one of the Three Saints of the Lion King Agency—and the Fourth Primogenitor as well. We have obtained the support of MAR’s President Shahryar Ren. Though, I suppose the situation would have changed had today’s Cleansing succeeded...”

In a near-silent murmur, Akishige muttered “Absurd.” He did not understand

where he had gone wrong. At some point, the people he had discarded as insufficient had obtained power—enough to threaten his position. It was caused not by Meiga Itogami's betrayal or the failure of The Cleansing by themselves—it was as if the Demon Sanctuary itself possessed sentience, one that was trying to eliminate Akishige from its borders.

“Do you seriously believe small fry like you can manage this Demon Sanctuary? The darkness enveloping Itogami Island is the same as the darkness that envelops humankind!” Akishige howled, baring his raw emotions.

Unmoved, Kazuma sighed as a forlorn smile came over him. The girl known as Paper Noise wore a similar expression.

We knew that a long time ago, said the looks on their faces.

“I will keep that in mind, Father.”

Leaving those words behind with his wounded father, Kazuma disappeared in the darkness at the back of the passage.

Into the darkness of Itogami Island...



OUTRO

OUTRO

Meiga Itogami was wandering around a back alley of Island West.

He'd used a spell tablet sewn into the interior of his body to employ a teleport ritual. It was a dirty trick made possible with a jiangshi body that felt no pain. He could have never slipped away from Yukari Endou without resorting to such extreme measures.

However, at present, that immortal body had begun to break down. There were deep cracks over him, and pieces had begun falling away like dried-out plaster. It was the fault of the vast divine essence that had coursed from Yukina Himeragi. His body, wrought from a corpse, had been purified and was returning to its original form.

"High Priestess...!"

Using a mental communication ritual, Meiga called out to her.

Her avatar had been hijacked by Asagi Aiba, but the real body of the High Priestess, resurrected from a corpse, ought to have remained at the MAR lab. Even at that late stage, with her aid, Meiga could still employ the power of The Cleansing. Of course, having lost control of the Coffin, large-scale combat was impossible, but she could surely endure the burden of restoring his broken flesh. No, he would force her to endure it.

"Answer me, High Priestess... Priestess of Abel...!"

Meiga resisted his fear of his own collapse as he continued calling out to her. However, she did not respond.

MAR had enabled him to use the ritual that made this sort of communication possible. If he could no longer employ the mental communication ritual, he could only think of a single possibility.

MAR had cut Meiga Itogami loose. Now that he had betrayed Akishige Yaze

and, furthermore, lost to the Fourth Primogenitor, they had probably decided that they no longer had any use for him.

“Shit...”

Meiga’s breath was ragged as he thrust a hand against the street railing. A few of his fingers snapped off, turning into sand and scattering across the ground. His body was closer to its limit than he had imagined.

With Meiga in such a state, he heard an amused voice from very close by.

“So the man who betrayed the Lion King Agency, betrayed his own father, betrayed Akishige Yaze...is betrayed and abandoned by MAR in the end. You make quite a pitiful sight, Meiga Itogami...”

“...?!”

Meiga lifted his face in surprise. A slender man was standing in the back of the dark alley ahead. The voice belonged to a blond, blue-eyed vampire aristocrat clad in a white three-piece suit.

“Dimitrie Vattler...”

How did he know about this place? was the question Meiga silently harbored. Then his gaze fell to his own right arm. It was the arm Vattler had given him when he had lost the original in his first battle with the Fourth Primogenitor. He’d probably implanted a transmitter of some kind during the repair process. *An unexpectedly meticulous man*, thought Meiga in admiration.

“Though it is an unfortunate end from your perspective, I thank you, Meiga Itogami. Thanks to you, I have not been bored. No, rather, I have been considerably entertained.”

Vattler praised Meiga with an overly theatrical voice.

Meiga’s shoulders fell in exasperation. “Entertained? By the Forbidden Ritual meant to destroy Demonkind?”

“But of course. A power that can destroy even a primogenitor—splendid, is it not?”

Vattler gave a handsome smile. Suddenly, Meiga’s expression stiffened.

Meiga's crumbling body began to quiver in fear. The repeatedly whimsical actions of the man called Dimitrie Vattler—he laid one over another until they took shape in his mind.

Meiga realized that this formed a truly frightening picture.

"I understand now...Dimitrie Vattler... The real purpose of your coming to Itogami Island..."

Under Vattler's beautiful, blue-eyed stare, Meiga could no longer move, frozen under the gaze of a serpent—that was his present circumstance. One false move and he would be consumed. Whether he fled or fell prostrate and begged, the handsome vampire aristocrat was unlikely to stay his hand.

There was only one outcome he would countenance. And that was—

"The power of The Cleansing—incomplete though it might be, you can still use it, yes? Care to give it a try?" Vattler taunted.

Yes—as always, this man desired but one thing: to wager his life in deadly combat.

"Ugh... Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaagh...!!"

Meiga screamed. The right arm Meiga stretched toward Vattler was enveloped by particles of light.

No longer receiving the High Priestess's support, Meiga could not control the vermillion bullets. All Meiga could manage at that moment was to offer his own arm as a sacrifice with which to summon the power of The Cleansing.

It was the world-altering radiance that nullified a vampire's supernatural power. If he pounded that home, the possibility of defeating even Vattler was not zero. Vattler gazed at Meiga's desperate resistance with an enthralled expression.

"Yes, this... This is a power suitable for me to consume...!"

Vattler bared his fangs. The destructive surge of demonic energy he unleashed struck down Meiga's damaged body in an instant. The light of The Cleansing had now been rendered meaningless.

As Meiga went rigid, Vattler sank his fangs into Meiga's windpipe. It was not

Meiga's stagnant blood that the Warlord's Empire's Master of Serpents was draining from that place, but Meiga's memory of the past.

"Dimitrie Vattler... Your objective...is the knowledge of Cleansing... The intellect of Cain..."

Meiga's final murmurs were inaudible, for before his voice could make them, his windpipe had been torn out.

Having exceeded its limits, Meiga's body collapsed, white smoke rising as it disintegrated without a trace.

In a back alley of Island West, amid the darkness of Itogami Island, Vattler's white fangs were dyed pitch-black from fresh blood as he laughed heartily.

"Now the stage has been set. Let us begin the final banquet. We shall dance most beautifully, Kojou Akatsuki. Beautifully, beautifully, beautifully, beautifully, beautifully, beautifully, beautifully, beautifully, beautifully....."



Dusk had fallen.

Kojou walked along a coastal footpath with Yukina and Asagi in tow.

Their destination was Kojou's and Yukina's apartment building. After all, the pair was beat-up and exhausted from prolonged combat, and on top of that, Asagi attracted the eyes of others. So, unable to take the bus or the monorail, the three had to drag their tired bodies, continuing to putter along on foot.

"So why do I have to walk around hiding my face behind a mask?"

Asagi was complaining about having to wear a baseball cap and a medical mask as she walked around in the middle of sweltering, humid heat.

"Can't be helped!" quipped Kojou, earnestly trying to pacify her. "You're a celebrity. Well, just put up with it for now. The Gigafloat Management Corporation apologized and said it'd give you bodyguards until things settled down and all. Everyone'll forget in no time."

"Ugh... I ordered Mogwai to wipe out every shred of promo material that was on the net, but it's just not enough. Geez, taking on the Priestess of Abel was a piece of cake compared to this!"

Asagi sighed deeply as she gazed at the screen of her beloved smartphone.

It was certainly a large helping of gloom, but Kojou could deeply appreciate why she wanted to complain. She'd been shut inside a submarine for the last two weeks, and furthermore, her face and name had been spread all over Itogami Island during that time. And on top of *that*, there was even a promotional video that she had no memory of ever shooting. Any normal person might well have fallen into a complete panic by that point.

That the citizens' reaction to it was largely positive was a saving grace, but setting that aside, having complete strangers call out to you was quite a thing to have to deal with.

So for the near future, Asagi would have to put up with stress and anguish she hadn't signed up for. In the end, she was definitely the number one victim of The Cleansing.

"But Aiba, is your body really fine?"

Carrying her black guitar case on her back, Yukina asked Asagi that in a timid, hesitant manner.

After all, she'd spent two weeks confining herself and being at war with the Priestess of Abel. Normally, it would be cause for immediate hospitalization followed by rigorous medical tests as a precaution.

In fact, Natsuki Minamiya and Lydianne had arranged medical services, but Asagi had said, "That's just a nuisance." With that one phrase, she had brushed it off—and thus had they arrived at the present.

Asagi shook her head with a distinct lack of urgency. "Yeah. Well, time was basically frozen for me while I was locked inside the sub, okay? It felt like being in cryostasis. Thanks to that, I'm pretty hungry—"

"Don't complain. You already bought up every last *onigiri* at the convenience store. You scared the hell out of the dude at the register, y'know?"

Kojou muttered his retort in a voice so small that it was unclear whether Asagi ever heard him. After all, regardless of whether it was surprising to see a local idol who was all the rage at the moment suddenly entering the store, she'd bought thirty rice balls, the store's entire stock. It wasn't difficult to imagine

why the boy working part-time had been shocked.

“Well, if we’d gone to a family restaurant, they would have kicked us out because of the uproar, so I couldn’t help it, all right?” Behind the mask, Asagi pursed her lips as she resentfully glared toward Kojou.

Then she turned on a dime, facing Yukina, who was behind her, as she said, “More importantly, this has been bugging me for a while now—Himeragi, what’s up with that ring?”

“Oh...this?”

Startled, Yukina widened her eyes. She was no doubt surprised that the ring, which did not have a design that stood out in any particular way, had attracted Asagi’s attention.

“This is a ring that Akatsuki-senpai gave me, so I really cannot take it off now —”

“H-huh?”

As Asagi listened to Yukina’s explanation, her eyes opened wide, practically bulging out.

The dramatic reaction made Yukina all the more flustered as she tried to clarify, “You are mistaken. Um, it is not like that... Akatsuki-senpai simply put it on my finger as a kind of good luck charm, so—”

Yukina’s assertion still came off as desperate. In spite of every word being true, she managed to make Asagi’s mood even sourer.

Asagi levied a bloodlust-filled gaze at Kojou. “Oh, really...? Would you mind explaining, in detail, what that ring actually means?”

“Er, a bunch of stuff happened on our end during the time you were stuck in that sub...”

“Whaddaya mean, *a bunch of stuff*?!”

“Ah, I mean, the full story is gonna get super-annoying so, um, well...”

With Kojou backed into a corner, Asagi opened her mouth to yell, clearly annoyed.

But then they heard another shout from a nearby footpath.

“Ah, there you are! Yukina!”

Nagisa Akatsuki, apparently on her way home from visiting her father at the hospital, pointed at Kojou and the others.

As soon as the crossing signal turned blue, Nagisa ferociously raced toward Kojou and the others. Kojou felt like seeing her that menacing just had to be an evil omen.

“N-Nagisa? What’s wrong that got you all worked up like...?”

“Don’t ask *me* what’s wrong, Kojou! What did you do to Yukina, you idiot?! You beast! Yukina, are you all right? I’m on your side, no matter what happens, Yukina!”

Nagisa slammed her tote bag into the side of Kojou’s face, then firmly took hold of both of Yukina’s hands, eyes tearing up as she unleashed her tongue in rapid-fire speech. Kojou and Yukina looked back at Nagisa in astonishment, neither having a clue what was going on.

“B...beast...?!”

“N-Nagisa?”

“I really am a little reluctant to call someone an in-law at your age, but if I call you Big Sis, it’s totally okay, right? I mean, I think any baby of yours is definitely gonna be cute, Yukina. More importantly, what about the name? Is it a boy? Is it a girl?”

“B-baby...?”

Asagi, overhearing Nagisa’s explosive statement, dropped her jaw, as if physically struck senseless.

Yukina looked genuinely conflicted, her gaze roaming around as she said, “I-I’m sorry, Nagisa, I have no idea what you’re talki—”

“There’s no need to hide it. It’s all right. I heard everything from Miss Kirasaka!”

“From Sayaka?”

Yukina's expression clouded over, for apparently even she was getting uneasy at that point.

What the heck did she say? thought Kojou, unwittingly raising his face toward the heavens.

Nagisa displayed not a single shred of guilt, seemingly arriving at the memory as she touched a hand to her lips and said:

"Sayaka said something really big was happening to Yukina's body because of Kojou, and the testing fluid had a positive result. Come to think of it, Yukina, lately you haven't been very energetic, you haven't had any appetite for food..."

"Ah..."

Yukina's big eyes blinked as if something had suddenly occurred to her.

Then, a tiny "hee" spurt out of her as she bent forward, her shoulders beginning to tremble. She was desperately trying to resist breaking into laughter. Sayaka and Nagisa's misunderstanding was apparently quite amusing to her.

However, viewed from a side angle, Yukina could also look like she was about to break into sobs.

"Wh-what's the meaning of this, Kojou?! Testing fluid, positive... Don't tell me, that ring means you intend to take responsibility as a man...?!"

Grabbing Kojou by the collar and lifting him up, Asagi interrogated him in a very shrill voice.

Kojou, unable to breathe properly due to the pressure on his neck, desperately wrung out his voice.

"You've got it all wrong! Himeragi, stop laughing and save me, dammit! Listen to me! It's all a misunderstandiiiiing!"

The tragic cries of the World's Mightiest Vampire floated along the sea breeze, melting into the twilight sky.

This was a brief moment of tranquility before the new banquet was about to begin.

It wouldn't be much longer before any of them realized it.



Afterword

Before I knew it, five months had passed since the previous volume. It's been a while. So there you have it, *Strike the Blood*, Vol. 14 has hit the shelves.

This volume is the episode when the mysteries of The Cleansing are unraveled. The intrigue surrounding Itogami Island, the truth behind Meiga Itogami, and the many mysteries that have caused Kojou and his friends such anguish have now been dramatically exposed. As a result, a great turning point has arrived for a number of the *dramatis personae*, but I would be glad if you find these to be enjoyable changes.

Personally, the biggest impression I had from this volume was Asagi's "idol debut." She's a character who really does have the potential to become a star, but she doesn't seem very cut out for it personality-wise, so I had fun imagining what it would be like to see her try to act the part of an idol. Also, I'm sure everyone who has read the main text already realizes this, but the story this time was a rather crucial one for Kojou and Yukina's relationship. I have a sense that what the pair does won't deviate all that much from the norm, but a certain object might hold significant meaning for them down the road.

Beyond that, the other thing I can't forget would have to be the other vampire scene. If you were excited to finally have a scene with a vampire other than Kojou (or if you went "What, *you two*?!"), I'm happy.

I believe you are already aware of this, but a new drama CD and a new OVA are scheduled to go on sale right around the publication of this novel. I was very slightly a bit of a pest at the dubbing of the drama CD, but seeing the old cast brought back together and engaging in such passionate performances made for putting together an extremely fun piece of work, on top of doing their utmost to produce the recently completed OVA, just like what they did for the TV series. I believe that all the little details will live up to your expectations as

supporting fans, so please, please, please go watch, listen, and enjoy.

Also, a bit before this book goes on sale, the seventh volume of the comic version of *Strike the Blood* serialized in *Monthly Dengeki Daioh* will go on sale. In the latest publication, the combat scenes are, of course, thrilling, but La Folia is also extremely cute (and Yukina and the others, too). Definitely check it out.

Now then, with the next volume, the first major part of *Strike the Blood* is scheduled to come to completion. I feel like the series itself will be continuing for a little while longer, but we can finally point to a definite dividing line. Please stay and watch all the characters' exploits until the very end.

As happens every time, Manyako was an enormous help with drawing beautiful illustrations for this work. Truly, thank you very much. And once again, I thank TATE-sensei, in charge of the comic version, for turning out such marvelous work.

Also, allow me to thank each and every person related to the creation and publication of this work from the bottom of my heart.

Of course, my most heartfelt thanks are reserved for all of you who have read this book.

I very much hope to see you again next volume.

Gakuto Mikumo

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Contents

[Cover](#)

[Insert](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Intro](#)

[Chapter One: The False Idol](#)

[Chapter Two: Into Stratum Zero](#)

[Chapter Three: The Spear and the Angel](#)

[Chapter Four: The Cleansing](#)

[Outro](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Yen Newsletter](#)